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Robert Silverberg

Like many of you, I put in a couple of long evenings in front of the television screen this summer just past, getting reports old and new from the space frontier.

First, in July, came the twentieth anniversary telecast of the Apollo 11 lunar mission. I had watched the original astounding show televised from the moon in 1969, of course but I found the second time around just as overwhelming as the first, just as full of wonder and magic and even suspense. To watch the Eagle lunar module gliding downward toward its landing site, to listen to Neil Armstrong phlegmatically reading off the numbers as the ship approached touchdown, above all to hear that stunning announcement, "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed" (far more thrilling, I thought than Armstrong's stagy one-small-step speech a little while later) - it shook me and moved me just as deeply as it had on that first summer day.

And so I sat spellbound for hours. looking on as the shadowy figures of Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin hopped and cavorted about on the bleak lunar surface. There were long spells, fifteen, twenty minutes at a time, when nothing particular was happening, and even those were irresistibly gripping. Incomprehensible tasks were performed, inaudible comments were exchanged, and all that went through my mind was the thought that these two guys were actually walking around on another world, that they were up

there in the sky fussing around in front of their newly landed spaceship, and I was watching the whole thing on television. Day One of the Age of Space, ves indeed, and all cynicism was put aside for the moment. To hear Armstrong announce, "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon," and hear him say, "We came in peace for all mankind," and to hear President Nixon, talking to the two spacefarers by telephone from the White House, declare a few minutes afterward, "For one priceless moment in the whole history of man, all the people on this earth are truly one" even the most flippant of us, the most jaded, those most given to scoffing, would have found it hard to avoid a little shiver of awe

And then, a month later, the Nep-

tune flyby -Once again, wonders from the void. The valiant little Voyager 2 spacecraft, chugging on and on through the remote corners of the solar system, arriving in the neighborhood of Neptune at last after a twelve-year journey of nearly three billion miles. A mere 150 years ago, we hadn't even known that Neptune existed; and here we were now, looking down from 3,000 miles above Neptune's surface, watching the televised pictures of previously unknown moons, of the quintet of rings that circles the planet, of bizarre and mystifying features of the landscape.

I suppose Triton was the star of the Neptune show - perhaps the most



SOME THINGS ARE WORTH THE WAIT!

Like the next two books in the Buck Rogers series. In Book two of the Martian Wars Trillogy, Hammer of Mars, Buck Rogers Ignores threats from RAM and continues riding on the wave of NEO's recent victory. When Buck Rogers goes to Venus to strike an alliance, RAM makes good on its threats and sends its massive armoda against a relatively defenseless Forth.



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fascinating of all the strangenesses of our solar system that Voyager has shown us in its astonishing odyssey past Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and now Neptune. "Tiron," one space scientist said, "has one of just about every-thing," And another, bemused by the photos coming in, was heard to declare, "Triton is the most curious thing we've evr seen."

Yes. That lovely, inhospitable moon nearly the size of our own, with a mottled pink face rimmed by a line of blue: how amazing it turned out to be! Ice volcanoes spewing great plumes of frozen nitrogen over hundreds of miles. A pocked and pitted terrain dotted with islands of frozen methane. An atmosphere and a magnetic field, just as though it were a planet and not simply one of Neptune's moons. Even a haze of photochemical smog. An extraordinary place, posing problems that astronomers will be pondering for years to come. As for Neptune itself, where storms beyond our comprehension are spawned by forces beyond our understanding - 400-mile-an-hour gales drive clouds of frozen methane through the thick atmosphere of hydrogen and helium - it seems even harder to make much sense out of the Voyager findings. Since the sun provides Neptune with scarcely any heat, where is the source of the energy that powers those tremendous storms? Some internal furnace in the planet's rocky core? Why is Neptune's magnetic field tipped an unlikely 50 degrees from the axis of its rotation? Why do Neptune and the other huge planets far from the sun have so many more moons than the inner worlds? What ancient violence took place in the outer reaches of the solar system to shatter some of those moons and create belts of rings out of the debris?

The myriad unanswered questions

demand new voyages of discovery and underscore the poignancy of the knowledge that the Neptune flyby marks the effective end of Voyager's long and spectacular mission. Since 1962 and the first Venus expedition, we have visited every known planet of our system except Pluto - a staggering achievement, one guaranteed to send chills down the spine of any science-fiction reader old enough to remember when all this was merely the stuff of dreams and fantasy. But where are the new space probes? When does the first manned expedition to Mars set out? Why is there no base on the moon? Did the Age of Space end less than a generation after it began?

Of course not. And those who think so are falling for a glib, easy line of unthinking mythologizing.

It's true that nobody is exploring the moon these days or talking about journeys to Mars. Much of our Cape Canaveral space complex is in mothballs, and the vast Houston-based enterprise of our Apollo days is quiet. Even the space-shuttle program, the one vestige of NASA's once-ambitious dream that survived into the 1980's, went through two years of inactivity as a result of the ill-advised use of civilians aboard the Challenger and the paralyzing timidity that afflicted our government officials in the wake of the colossal public relations debacle that the Challenger disaster became.

But although the shuttle was put on hold until a public mysteriously phobic about risk could be given an absolute guarantee of a safe flight, other significant things have been taking place on the space frontier, both in this country and abroad. Soon we'll be getting signals back from the Magellan spacecraft, launched by the shuttle Atlantis last spring and due to reach

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Janet Winters: Circulation Manager Venus in mid-1990. As I write this, the launching of the Galileo probe toward Jupiter is imminent. An unmanned Mars flyby will take place in 1993. A Saturn probe will be launched in 1996. And so on.

Too little, and too slow? Perhaps so. But the true Age of Space hasn't even begun yet. The real enterprise is still to come. So far, everything that has been done has been under bureaucratic control, subject to governmental budgetary problems and all manner of considerations of domestic and foreign policy. It would have been impossible for any real space work to be accomplished otherwise; the cash requirements were too great, and the need for multi-company cooperation so vital, that only the United States government could have managed the job and so it did, for better and for worse.

Now the feasibility of space travel has been demonstrated, the technology is in place, and the time has come for NASA to recede into history. The big news of the decade ahead will be that private corporations will be getting their own spaceships out there - for private ends. The plans are already on the drawing board, here and overseas. Companies you've never heard of are looking eagerly toward the 21st century, which, after all, is only a decade away. And, unlike NASA, they won't need to run public-opinion polls before they send the ships - only profit-andloss tallies.

You may find this idea unsettling. You may thing of the beer cans strewn on Mars in Ray Bradbury's stories, or see images of strip-mining on Ganymede. Perhaps so; we tend to be a messy race. But the first contracts have already been let: small projects that will lend inevitably to bigger ones. Rockets will go forth; the profit motive once again will provide the fuel, as it did for Magellan, for Columbus, for Leif Erikson, for anyone who ever took a step into the unknown. Neither Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain nor Elizabeth of England sent their explorers forth out of high-minded motives of pure curiosity. It was strictly a business venture, in which the monarchs were partners. Like it or not, we're going to see space entered on the same basis - and soon. If we don't do it, the French or the Japanese or perhaps even the suddenly capitalistic Soviets will be the ones to make the attempt. The prizes are too great to ignore; the risks of doing nothing are too perilous to accept.

So I came away heartened, ultimately, from this summer's telecasts of the voyages of Apollo 11 and Voyager 2. The facile response is for us to tell each other that the shows were depressing to watch because they remind us of the premature end of our venture into space. The truth is that we are simply in a period of transition. The Age of Space has not ended at all; we are still just at the beginning, and progress toward the next step is being made. The universe is waiting, and we - without the help of the politicians, the bureaucrats, and the imagepolishers - will get there.

EUROPE AFTER THE RAIN

The dark traveler with a scythe of light Steps down into the cumuli of stacked centuries Opens the sky of his past Raining

selves in paradox-arcs

a tin-town of the Second Middle Ages

Repopulating

the crashed redoubt

Who labor at immaculate reconstruction

At the beltways the tumbled minarets

- the sight of the original crime

His minions are dismembering

a sacred animal

Voracious they rend his fallen shadow

Drink from its inky chambers

Paint factory-turrets with its black bile

His cantos coalesce

in their circle of stabbing stars

His dreams petrify into fountains

Conduits of memory forged alloy on alloy by the drones

forged alloy on alloy by the dro Yet still his flame-eaten reveries

cannot sustain an ordered weave

Or consciousness deny this portrait

in flayed madrigals

A millennium-loop

undone

- Robert Frazier and Andrew Joron





The windows of Kelier's, a small bar on a side street in a run-down section of San Francisco, were smeared over with dark green paint to keep sunlight from disturbing the early-morning drinkers. The paint was cracked in places and admitted a watery glow. The inside of the place was like a dingy aquarium filled with red-eyed, wrinkled patrons who resembled those prehistoric fish they keep finding in out-of-the-way parts of the world. I was filling my glass with Dewars scotch when the explosion rattled the thin walls and flaked even more paint from the windows.

"Jesus," Herbie Johnson said. "What the fuck was that?"

I was pleased to note my hand didn't shake. I finished topping off my glass and placed the bottle back in the middle of the table, where Herbie grabbed it and took a long, shuddering swallow straight from the neck.

"Easy, boy. That jug has to last all day." Keller's was the kind of lawbending dive that sold booze by the glass, the bottle, or the keg, for all I

knew.

Herbie wiped his lips and let out a long sigh. "You want to go look?"

"Huh uh. If something out there wants us, it can come inside."

The morning bartender, a new guy whose name I hadn't bothered to

learn, came round from behind the bar, an anxious look on his bug-eyed face and a sawed-off baseball bat in his hand. He sidled warily to the door and opened it a crack.

"See anything?" Herbie called.

The bartender shook his head. "I don't see nothing."

"Stick your head out. If something shoots it off, then we'll know." Herbie sounded cheered by the thought. The bartender glared.

"Why'n't you stick your head out, you old gasbag? Then if something happens, it won't be no loss,"

nappens, it won't be no loss.

Herbie turned back to his own drink. "Young punks," he muttered. "Got no respect."

I tasted my scotch. It was my first of the day, and it went down smoothly, a tight little bomb of warmth straight to my gut.

"Ah," I said. "Better."

The bartender was still peering nervously through the cracked door, shaking his head. "I'm telling you, ain't nothing out there."

"So go on outside. Send us a telegram," Herbie advised. "We'll wait right here till you get back."

"God, you're a nasty man," the bartender said.

Herbie cackled. He was good at that. He had just the right kind of ruined face and gap-toothed mouth for cackling. "I'll drink to that," he said, and raised his glass again. "I'll sure as hell drink to that."

My own scotch was extending rosy fingers into the rest of my body, scraping away the foggy remnants of a moderate hangover. It hadn't been a bad night. I remembered everything, and everything I remembered was okay. So you think scotch is a weird breakfast? Some people think eggs are pretty

strange. I happen to be one of them.

The bartender, who had extended his bony skull slowly around the edge of the door, suddenly jerked back inside. A cascade of whistles and a long, low growling noise yammered at the green windows. Herbie's eyes widened.

"What the hell now? Is it a gang war?" Immediately, he shook his head, "Naw, No guns," He screwed me with a glance across the rim of his glass.

"Come on, Chandler, You're our hero, Go take a look,"

I wasn't feeling very heroic. It doesn't come with only one scotch. But it didn't seem that either the racket or Herbie was going to let up any time soon; and the bartender, now hovering against the inner wall of Keller's, didn't look like he was coming up with any ready solutions.

I chugged off the rest of my drink and closed my eyes. Nine A.M. is too early for bravery. Hell, any time is too early.

"I'll go look," I said.

"That's my man," Herbie said, and toasted me with his drink. For some reason I noticed his fingernails were caked with grime.

My feet hurt, "That's me," I agreed, and stood up,

I stood just inside the door and looked out on the part of the street I could see. It was empty in a perfect blue San Francisco morning. "Give me that bat," I said to the bartender. He handed it over and then scuttled behind the bar. I hefted the thing. It was heavier than it should be, and weighted funny. The fat end was taped, Lead-loaded, I guess,

I don't know what I thought I'd do with a sawed-off bat if it was some of the local drug entrepreneurs out there settling differences with bombs, but it made me feel better just to hold it. I pushed open the door and stepped outside. The street - called Rose Alley, but only the locals knew because the street signs had long ago been ripped down - was empty from one end of the block to the other.

The noises were coming from the right, where Rose Alley intersected with Twenty-Fifth. I walked in that direction, keeping close to the storefronts, holding the bat out in front of me like a blind man with a stick. Feeling stupid.

The bizarre sounds had diminished. Now something like a final gasp — a huge balloon collapsing, slowly flubbering out - filled the bright morning air. Then nothing. I reached the corner and stood there.

A long time ago in another world I was in the army. I ended up at an exclusive school in the Virginia countryside, learning how to be a spy. It was a joke, of course, but at the time the choices had been leading a company through the jungles of El Salvador or learning how to be a spook. On balance spookery had seemed the safer option. They called it tradecraft. Mostly, it consisted of keeping your mouth shut, your head down, and your ass covered at all times. Always good advice.

So what was I doing investigating strange happenings in a rotten neigh-

borhood armed with a baseball bat and a single glass of scotch in my gut?

Shit happens, that's what. It just does.

I got down on my hands and knees and put my head right up to the corner of the building about six inches above the cracked sidewalk. If any hyperspaced cowboys around the corner looked in my direction, they'd be looking head high. Or so I hoped.

I sneaked a quick peek, pulled back, then stood up. Walked around the

corner and crossed the street.

The big black maserlimo had hit the dirt right before the intersection and plowed a few feet into a corroded light pole. Now the pole was bent over the receiving lenses of the limo like a wilted daisy.

I peered into the car. The chauffeur was crumpled in the front, his neck at a crazy angle. There was a lot of blood. In the rear, the passenger safety bag was deflating slowly, making soft flup-plup noises. Her eyes were closed but she looked okay. I turned back to the chauffeur and reached through the blood to touch his neck.

Nothing.

On closer examination the big hole in his skull was quite obvious. Like somebody had pounded him a good one with a baseball bat.

Just like the one I held in my right hand. Was still holding, as cops began to fall from the sky like rain.

The first cop hit the ground rolling, came up in a crouch, and did what any cop would do if he saw some ragbag standing next to a wrecked maserlimo holding a baseball bat. He raised his tangler and pulled the trigger.

Whereupon one Chandler, only recently recovered from a mild hangover, became one hundred eighty pounds of nerve-frozen meat. Or so I assume. I

wasn't really there anymore.

I woke up in a cell. Not surprising. People the cops tangle usually wake up in a cell, if they wake up at all. There's an old joke among drinking folk. Some mornings they say that if normal people felt this bad, they'd check into a hospital. I felt that bad. And there was no hospital. Worse, there wasn't even a drink.

My skin ached.

So did my head.

I knew it was a cell because I could see bars. Sort of, Sudden bursts of white light kept exploding in my retinas, making details hard to decipher. It

was an aftereffect of tangling. It would go away. I hoped.

I was lying flat on my back on a hard bench against a dirty tile wall. I managed to roll over. Just enough, and just in time, My morning scotch hit the floor instead of hanging up in my throat and going back down to my lungs. Thus I avoided drowning in my own vomit.

Us poor folk lead such exciting lives, I thought, as my exciting life faded

into merciful darkness.

16 AMAZING

. . .

When I woke up again, the pain had receded a bit. No more than a Grade One hangover. I could handle that. My vision was a bit blurry, but the starbursts had disappeared. So I could see her standing on the other side of the bars looking at me. The heavyweight three-piece with her, who might as well have tattood LAWYER on his forehead in big neon letters, carefully didn't look at me. Instead, he spoke rapidly into her ear.

"This is crazy, Marie. He's just a bum. You don't owe him a thing."

"Get him out, Henry. Save the lecture for later."

Yeah, girl, I thought.

He said something else, too low for me to make out, and she tightened her lips and shook her head. He paused, then turned stiffly and marched away. "Are you awake?" she said at last.

"I think so." My voice sounded like somebody had punched me in the larvnx.

"What?"

I whuffed and gurgled and tried again. "Yeah, I'm awake."

"Good. I'm going to get you out of here."

"That would be fine."

"It wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything."

She made the statements sound like questions. I started to shake my head, thought better of it, and said, "I was just trying to help, lady."

Inought better of it, and said, "I was just trying to hen), lady." "You were just trying to help," she repeated. The conversation trailed off, and we stared at each other. I knew what she saw. She saw the results of what I called, in my occasional moments of sentiment, a long, slow, bad trip down. I didn't look as bad as I could have, but the years and the booze had left a trail across my face even I couldn't ignore. Of course, I had to look at it every time I shaved, which might have been why I had a three-day stubble across the evidence right then. The rest of the hundred eighty pounds was about what you'd expect from a resume that included not only spooking but short-order cooking, tech writing, the kind of pro boxing where the outcome was determined in advance, bartending (of course), and some free-lance stuff for friends that probably should be listed under "other."

She didn't look impressed. But she didn't look disgusted either.

I saw a woman pushing that indeterminate age that might have been anything from thirty to fifty. Straight black hair cut like a cap. Strong cheekbones and large, disconceringly blue eyes. A perfect figure both concealed and revealed by a red silk outfit that would support my habits for a year. And the Bobby.

I don't know why I hadn't noticed it at the beginning, in the maserlimo. I

I don't know why I hadn't noticed it at the beginning, in the maserlimo. I probably wasn't thinking. But I saw it now, the elegant golden bracelet with its distinctive bulge, like a watch without a face. On her right wrist.

The going price, I recalled, was twenty million dollars.

And I wondered what I'd got myself into now.

Old pinch-faced Henry, her lawyer, handled clout as effortlessly as I did Dewars. He had me out in less than ten minutes. The two cops who brought me up didn't look happy about it, and neither did Henry. I made a note to avoid those cops if I saw them on the street. I didn't think I'd be seeing much of Henry. He left as soon as he did his duty, with a final warning to her about my obvious lack of character. She ignored him.

"Sorry," she said. "Three-piece suit and all, he's still a flunky. Sometimes I have to remind him who makes the decisions."

"Sure," I said. As if keeping a guy in line who could buy the entire block I lived on was a normal problem. Good old Chandler. So hard to find decent help these awful days.

She glanced at me. "You don't look very well."

"I don't feel very well." "Was it . . . painful?"

"The tangling? No." One of my more useful talents is a convincing ability to lie.

She nodded, "Well,"

We'd reached the steps leading down out of the station house. She looked around uncertainly, as if wondering where her limo might have gone.

"Hey," I said. "I haven't thanked you yet."

"That's not -"

"No, really. Let me buy you a drink." I felt giddy, light-headed. I wanted to talk to her. Get to know her. And I did need a drink.

She licked her lips. Thought about it.

"I'll get you a cab," I said.

"Okav."

Oh, Lord, what fools these mortals be.

The Hallcrest Cafe was right across from the station house. I'd been there a few times, on those occasions when I'd had business with the local cops. Usually bailing out Herbie Johnson when he'd had too much and decided he was superman. Herbie was a cop fighter, a stupid avocation for a man who weighed about a hundred twenty soaking wet. Or just plain soaked, which he usually was.

It wasn't a bad place as San Francisco bars go. Clean and neat, with a row of tall windows across the front and around the corner, so you could sit and sip and watch the bag ladies mumble at the bluecoats across the street.

I looked a little out of place there. The bartender saw it, but wasn't about to say anything when he caught the golden glint on the lady's wrist.

I settled into a thickly padded lounge chair and let out a long sigh. "Scotch," I told the bartender. "Dewars, straight up. Make it a double." Then I remembered my manners. "I'm sorry. What would you like?"

"Oh, whatever. Same as you, I guess."

My eyebrows rose a bir. I figure that scotch comes in two sizes, large and larger. But nobody ever called my drinking habits ladylike. "You sure? That's a pretty hefty drink."

Now her eyebrows rose. Probably the effect was totally different than my expression. On her it looked nice. "No problem." She seemed amused.

The bartender left, poured, came back. I drained mine down before he

could retreat again. "One more," I said.

He shook his head and did what he was told. I sipped this one. The first one had been a depth charge, to blast loose all the heebie-jeebies from the morning. Now I could lean back and enjoy the taste. It tasted good.

"Your name is Chandler," she said. "The police over there seem to know

you."

"Yeah. Some of them."

"But that's your only name. They said you didn't have a first name. Not even initials. Is that right?"

I shook my head. "That's right. Well, once I did. But everybody calls me

Chandler now."

"What were they? The initials, the other names?"

actually had to think about it. Like many things, my other names had slid away. From lack of use, mostly, "O. T.," I said. "For Oren Thistleman."

Her lips quirked. "I see," she said.

"They were easy to lose," I told her seriously.

"My name is Marie. Marie DeBakey." She said it as if it should mean something. She was right. It did.

"Mining? Lumber? Newspapers? Terrible Teddy Dee?"

"My father," she acknowledged.

"Maybe you should buy the drinks."

"I already have," she told me.

The afternoon sunlight oozed around us like warm honey. Was it afternoon already? Yes. I'd lost a morning. Not for the usual reasons, but not for the first time, either. They didn't have a good janitor in the Hallcrest. Tiny dust motes danced in the air. I felt loose and comfortable. The memory of the tangling had become only a memory. Thank God.

She looked at my empty glass. "You drink a lot, Mr. Chandler?"

"Just Chandler. Yeah. You could say I do."

She swallowed the dregs of her own drink. "So do I. Maybe that's why —" But she bagged the thought and tapped the base of her glass on the marble tabletop between us, "I've had a rough morning. Let's get drunk."

It was a surprising invitation from a lady like her. And now I noticed her staring at my face, nodding, as if she'd been thinking about me and only just now made her decision. I wondered what the question had been. But it was her tab. Things become more simple in some ways, when, as I do, you drink alto. One of the things you learn is to take what's offered. Take it with both

hands. And though I didn't know her reasons, I would have bet my last drink on earth she was offering more than booze.

"Sure," I said. "Let's."

Some of my instincts still worked okay. Too bad others didn't. But I didn't know that yet.

We were rollicking by the time we got to her place. We'd hit enough bars that I couldn't recall each one individually. Just a blur of bartenders, strangers, and glittering bottles. I'd even taken her to Keller's, where the petrified ichthyosaurs had watched her with slow, bemused wonder.

She was a frenetic drunk, Loud, happy, with a sharp, dark undercurrent. I wondered about that deeper river, Sadness? Fear? Or anger?

It could have been anything. Her house was a palace.

I don't know what I expected. I'd never been on the other side of the Wall. We called them Changers, those fantasy folk who wore Bobbies on their wrists and ruled the world. They tended to cluster with their own kind. They'd built a wall around the best part of Pacific Heights, where all the views are of the Golden Gate, and where sunrise and sunset are only different, private windows. They'd built a wall and now it was the Wall, and people like me didn't come across to the new high-tech fairyland.

Except I had. Ah, scotch, sweet nectar. If it hadn't turned my brain to

pudding, I might have asked myself why. But it had, and I didn't.

We ended on a broad patio that seemed about the size of a football field. We sat on spindly metal ice cream chairs at a white ice cream table and toasted the stars over the bay with twenty-year-old McCallan's single malt. The bubble condos strung beneath the bridge looked like God's necklace. The night was aguiver with perfection.

There was no one about but us. No servants or family. The house had an empty feel to it. She left the doors behind us wide open, and occasional breezes stirred the crystals of huge chandeliers within.

"Is this place haunted?"

She laughed. Her voice had gone deeper, whiskey rough and intimate.

"Not hardly. I built it two years ago."

"That all?" I was amazed. The house had that feel of centuries to it, heavy and hulking and dark. A masculine place that seemed at odds with her rampant femininity.

"It's a big house. Lot to it. You didn't see it all. Want to?"

I knew what she was saying. "Like what?"

"Like the bedrooms," she said, swaving gently. Or maybe I was.

I stood up and took the bottle of McCallan's by the neck. "Lay on," I said. I thought it was a pretty good pun. I'd forgotten what happened to the last person who used the line. But then, she wasn't Macduff either.

I didn't have to open my eyes to know it was going to be horrible. Maybe

it was the combination of booze and tangling. Maybe it was just the booze. Maybe I would die.

Maybe I wouldn't. Suddenly, I understood those pious folks who went around calling death "a release."

She wasn't in the bed with me. I could feel the subtle differences between two bodies and one on a single mattress. I was alone.

After a while I cracked an eyelid.

She'd left the drapes drawn. It was a mercy. One single fierce lance of light burned through a slit in the draperies and seared my eyeballs. I closed my eyes again. Perhaps I moaned.

I heard her open the door, close it, walk across the room. Her footsteps made little noise, but even that was painful. I knew this was a four-alarm headache, the kind that could keep me in bed two or three days. I hoped she didn't mean to kick me out right away.

"Here," she said. "Drink this."

It wasn't scotch, thank God. But it was a tall glass of very thin looking tomato juice. Just enough juice to turn the vodka a clear, lucid blood color. My hand did shake as I reached for it. Medicine.

"Not good this morning?"

I didn't reply. I concentrated on getting the glass to my lips without spilling too much. Finally I made it. The cool liquid flowed down my parched throat like a benediction, and the vodka explosion in my gut scared my heart into beating again. I waited while various parts of my body groaned into action. After a while I raised my right hand and stared at the fingers. Almost steady.

"More," I croaked.

"No. Not yet. Food first. Take my word. Mama knows best."

I propped myself up and stared at her. She looked fresh, brisk, brighteyed. She wore something brief and frilly and blue, and she looked a lot closer to thirty than fifty.

I tried to remember, and realized that I'd lost quite a bit of the night. I recalled a visit to Keller's, and then nothing till our sojourn on the patio. Nothing after that either. Did I — had we? It wasn't something you asked on the morning after.

But she'd been matching me drink for drink. Nobody could look that good after a night like that. Nobody.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

She grinned a devilish grin. "I feel fine. Why?"

I hate malicious innocence. "Because you should be dead. I'm dead. Don't I look dead?"

She shook her head. "You'll live, friend. You always have, haven't you?" I sank back down.

"No you don't," she said. She stripped the blanket and sheet away from me with a single motion. I grabbed for my crotch and curled up. "I've seen it already," she said. Her tone was dry, "Come on, get out of there. Shower's across the room. I put out some clothes. And a razor." She started to walk away, then paused. "Use the razor," she said.

At the door she stopped one final time. "About breakfast, in case you're interested. I made a pitcher of eye-opener. Don't be long." And then she was

gone.

I didn't cut myself shaving. It was an electric razor.

Small favors, Lord. Small favors.

We ate in a kitchen that would have done credit to a medium hotel. She prepared bacon, sausage, omelets, waffles, and country fries with her own hands — another surprising turn. We sat at a solid oak table next to windows overlooking the perfect sparkling blue of the bay.

I ate ferociously. Maybe we had done something the night before. I wished I could remember. Dimly, I recalled that sex had once been able to

goose my appetite. But I still didn't ask.

When I'd quit shoveling it in with both fists, she left and returned with a huge pitcher of that thin tomato juice. The food had done wonders. I poured without a quiver, and only sipped my drink.

She sat across from me, her blue eyes as clear as the sky outside, one finger tapping absently on her chin.

"Something wrong?"

"Why?"

"You're staring at me like I'm a piece of meat you're interesting in. Buying, maybe?"

"You selling?"

She hadn't screwed up the tomato juice with a lot of spices. I liked that. Perhaps the sees of well-being interfered with my bullshit detectors. "Look, Marie," I said. "This is all wonderful, but I don't think a lady like you is interested in a man like me just for my sparkling personality, my amiable companionship." I paused, then added. "Or was it as good for you as it was for me?" Brutal, but I like to puncture my own bubbles.

Her lips thinned. "You don't even remember, do you?"

"No."

And she laughed. It was a good, strong, belly laugh — haw, haw, haw — and it wasn't what I'd expected.

"Chandler, you are a piece of goods, aren't you?" And she started in again.

I wondered if I was blushing. Couldn't be. Too old for that. It had to be the vodka. I swallowed some more of it.

Finally she ran down. "Okay, I'm sorry. I think. It was just the look on your face." She sobered further, if that was the right word. "Clothes okay?"

I pinched a fold of my sleeve between two fingers. "I haven't owned a suit like this in — maybe I've never owned a suit like this. It's fine."

"You like this house?"

"What are you asking? You want me to move in?"

I thought she was going to start hooing and hawing again, but she pressed her lips tight together instead. "No. But I decided you might be the man I need. For a job. A real important job."

I finished my tomato juice, but I didn't pour another. She was serious.

And if she was serious, then she must be crazy.

"What kind of job?"

"Let's discuss payment, first."

I sighed. Humor her, then get out fast. "Okay. What's the payment?"
She didn't say anything. She took it out of her pocket and tossed it on the aak tabletop. It made a soft metallic clunk and lay there glittering in the sunlight. As golden as a thousand-dollar piece, and a lot more valuable.

"It's a Bobby," I said.

She wasn't crazy. She was just rich. Maybe at her level, the two meant the same thing.

She lifted her glass of tomato juice. "So," she said. "Do you want to discuss conditions of employment?"

"She thinks somebody's trying to kill her," I told Herbie.

He seemed a little in shock, even more than usual. On my way home I'd stopped at the big booze mart a couple blocks from my house and picked up a case of McCallan's. And although I'd kept my jacket sleeve pulled down to cover my Bobby, already my taste in liquor had improved. As well as my ability to pay for it.

Herbie had a bottle all to himself. He tilted it up, and I watched his Adam's apple go glug-glug for quite a while. He wiped his lips on the back of his shirt sleeve. He couldn't quite take his eyes off the golden bracelet on my wrist. He kept glancing over, the way you do when you try to avoid looking at a badly disfigured face, and can't make it.

"She gave you that Bobby?" he said for what must have been the fifth or

sixth time.

"Yeah." I extended my hand. "Here. Touch it. Go ahead. It's real."

His calloused fingertips smoothed across the metal and brushed the back of my forearm. "You sure about that, Chandler? It's not some kind of richbitch scam?"

And he had me. I sat back. I remembered what she'd told me, how it would take two or three days for the Bobby to read my body right down to the genetic level, then extrude tiny wires through the skin of my wrist and start to make changes. She'd warned me not to take the Bobby off for any reason.

But I didn't feel different. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel. She said that when it began to happen, I would know.

"It's not a scam," I said finally. There had been something in her eyes,

something black and determined behind the guileless blue. Whatever it was, whatever she thought she was doing, it meant something to her. And the Bobby didn't mean anything at all. It was only money. Something irresistible to get what she wanted. I didn't pretend to understand. I wondered if I ever would.

His raspy voice held a hint of soft wonder. "They say one of those things is worth twenty million bucks."

"It is, and it isn't."

"Huh?"

"If you went out and bought one for yourself, yeah, you'd pay that much. But if somebody stole mine, it would be worthless to them. They have to be set initially for one person, and they're only good for that person afterward. If somebody" — I glanced at him meaningfully — "were to steal this one, for instance, all it would be worth was the metal. And it's not real gold, Herbie. So don't get any ideas, okay?"

"Me? I wouldn't even think of such a thing." He raised his bottle again.

"In a pig's ass."

We both laughed then, but we understood each other.

He shook his head. "Chandler, she's a rich lady. She can buy whatever she wants. Why does she want you?"

That was the question, all right. It sure was. But I couldn't answer it. Not then. And I wanted that Bobby. I wanted it forever. She'd told me why she didn't have a hangover. Her Bobby took care of it. She could drink whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and get exactly the result she desired. And no hangovers, ever.

She didn't seem too impressed by it.

But then, she'd bought me with it. Are the trinkets worth the purchase? Then the trinket maybe wasn't worth very much.

I didn't understand any of it. Not really. But I could pretend. If you wait long enough, almost anything comes clear. Or fades away.

"Why would anybody want to kill her?"

I reached for my own bottle, thought again, and put my hand in my lap. The Bobby couldn't do anything about a hangover yet. I could take it easy for a couple of days. Hell, as far as it went, I could quit any time I wanted to. Easy. I just didn't want to quit yet. That was all.

"Not the right question. Not yet, at least. Did you get a look at that wrecked maserlimo?"

He shook his head. "When the cops come down, this boy stays inside." He stopped, grinned. "I did this time, anyway. I saw them hauling you off. Who would have bailed me out?"

"Yeah. Well, her chauffeur had a hole in his head the size of a baseball. And his safety bag worked just fine. He didn't hit his head on anything. But something punched a piece right out of his skull."

"She got any ideas about it?"

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I remembered the blank, taut look on her face as she'd told me. "Uh huh. She says his head exploded."

Herbie just stared at me.

"I know, I know," It was time for a drink. I did.

Detective Lieutenant David Shedleski was called Cementhead by everybody who knew him, although not to his face. And it was his face, not his brains, that led to the nickname. Dave Shedleski's face looked as if it had been carved from a stretch of very old sidewalk, all gray and lumpy and cracked. He'd once been a friend, back when I'd had friends instead of drinking cronies. I'd done him a few favors and never called in the markers. Now I needed some official help. It would have been nice to think he'd pitch in without having to keep score, but I was glad the markers were still open.

His office was in the same station house I'd recently almost puked myself to death in. It had been over a year, but he came around his desk, big meaty fist outstretched, as if we'd had lunch just the day before.

"Chandler. How you doing?" His voice sounded like rocks rattling in a garbage can, but his brown eyes were mild. He was the toughest sonofabitch I knew, but I'd seen him cry like a baby on occasion. He gave me the onceover as I pumped his hand. "Nice suit, bubba. You picking a better class of dumpster these days?"

"Yeah. I quit hanging around behind your house," I told him. "Even

bums got some dignity."

The word seemed to pain him. "Still hitting the sauce like always?" Then he shook his head. "You could do better, Chandler."

Maybe this was one reason our get-togethers were few and far between. But I still needed his help. I could swallow a veiled hint or two. "Sauce is sauce, Dave. I've seen you belt a few yourself."

"Yeah, but - oh, hell. Skip it. What can I do for you?"

I didn't say anything. I just shot the sleeve on my new suit and let him look at the gold.

I'd expected him to be surprised, but I should have known better. In his line he'd seen it all, and then seen it again. All he did was shake his big head slowly.

"Oh, Chandler, Oh, buddy, What did you do now?"

"No, Dave, Not what you think, It's real, Go ahead, take a look,"

He touched the metal gingerly. "Uh, Chandler, I want to check something. You mind?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

He brought me over to his desk and unraveled some kind of probe at the end of a long cord from his data remote. "Hold still," he said, and waved the small wand over my Bobby. Then he looked at his monitor. I couldn't see what the screen said, but his eyes narrowed slightly, then widened. "Jesus, Chandler. It's not a fake. You're registered. It really is yours."

"Uh huh."

"What — how —?" He stopped. Something strange came over his lumpy face. "No, I'm sorry. I'm just a cop. I don't ask questions like that of Chang-

ers. Please accept my apologies, Chandler, Mr. Chandler,"

It was one of the saddest things I've ever felt. If I had any friends left, Dave Shedleski had to be one of them. And now, because of a band of gold around my wrist, a wall had come between us. No, a Wall. And it hurt as bad as anything ever has. He was looking at me like I'd died and gone to heaven. Or hell.

"Dave, it's Chandler. Just Chandler. Like it's always been."

He shook his head. "Not like it's always been." He paused trying to think it through. Made up his mind. Sighed slowly. "Okay, still Chandler. Until you want to change it."

"I'll never want to."

There was something almost like pity in his voice. "Maybe." He slumped back in his creaky chair, a big, tired man who'd seen a lot and knew he would see more. He swiped one hand across his face, pulling at the gray skin like it was rubber. "Anyway, So you've come up in the world. Way up. What do you need with a cop?"

"You do that maserlimo thing the other day? Was that yours?"

"The chauffeur? Yeah, I caught the beep on it. Why? Is there a problem?"

"I just want to know what you think?"

"What I think? I think it's more Changer bullshit, and I don't want any part of it." He stopped, glanced at my wrist. "Pardon me."

I'd tried to imagine what it would be like, being a Changer. Everybody has. Now I was seeing it firsthand, from the other side. It wasn't as nice as I'd hoped.

"Dave, look. I'm still me. This thing on my wrist doesn't make any differ-

He kept his face carefully blank. "If you say so, Chandler. And listen. If you want to know about the limo wreck, why not just key into CeeNet and get it all direct?"

"CeeNet?" I was confused. "What's a CeeNet?"

He blinked. "You mean you don't know? Chandler, you sure everything's

all right with that Bobby? With how you got it and all?"

I was clearly missing something here. And I didn't see any other way out. So I told him the whole story. Right from the beginning. The only parts I left out were what I couldn't remember. They were gone forever.

He started laughing right near the end and kept on chuckling and snorting until I finished. Then he made more noises that sounded like a pig choking. I told him so.

He wiped his eyes. "So she just gave it to you after a little boff, huh? One fast bang-bang and now you're a Changer? Oh, shit, Chandler, you don't

even remember. You probably can't even get it up." He choked some more. I felt like helping him with it a little.

But the Wall was down. I might have looked ridiculous to him, but he was used to that. The Chandler he knew probably was ridiculous. At any rate,

that standoff look was gone from his eyes.

He blew his nose on a big plaid hanky. His voice went serious. "Chandler, that's the goddamnedest story I ever heard. But I got to believe it 'cause you got a Bobby on your wrist. So let me give you one piece of advice. You be real careful. You take real good care of yourself. Because this whole thing stinks to high heaven."

I'd been smelling a rank odor already. "I know."

"Just so you do. Okay, so you're not turned on and plugged in yet. CeeNet. I don't know everything about it. It's Changer territory. Private. But ChangerNet is into everything. I'll tell you what I've got on this deal, but there's probably more. Maybe you can dig it out once you're functioning."

I nodded. "So give me what you got. Right now I don't have anything but

DeBakev's suspicions."

"And watch yourself with her, too. I've heard stories -"

"Yeah? What kind?"

But he shook his big head. "Not my place. There was something a long time ago... but if it's relevant, you'll find out on your own. Anyway, the chauffeur. A nobody. Hired help. Name of Oscar Verrazano. Also did gardening work at her place up on the Heights. Been with her four, almost five years. No family but his old mother, and he ain't seen her for longer than that."

I chewed my tongue and wished I had a drink. I knew Cementhead kept a jug of bourbon in his desk, but I wasn't about to ask. "So was he murdered"

Cementhead nodded, "Bigger than life,"

"How?"

"He had a bomb in his skull."

"Horseshit."

He steepled his thick fingers and stared over them at me. "You're a Changer now, Chandler. You'll learn. He was a trusted servant. Had some fancy hardwiring behind his ear that let him hook into CeeNet in a limited way. Changers are paranoid. They like to know what's going on with the people close to them. But this is a new wrinkle. I never heard of an exploding plant. Course if there was such a thing, they wouldn't tell me. Like I said, I'm only a cop."

I played with it. "So it could have been anybody?"

He shrugged. "Who the hell knows? I don't know what was in there."

"Then Marie DeBakey's a suspect?"
His brown eves went darker, more hooded. "Well. Suspect is a pretty

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strong word, Chandler."

It was finally beginning to sink in. How powerful the Changers really were. Dave Shedleski was a very good cop. He had ideas, but something was holding him back. It made him angry, but he'd been around for a long time. There's another thing a drunk knows. Sometimes life hands you shit. And you take that with both hands, too.

"I'll give you a printout of what we've got." He leaned forward and opened a side desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of Jack Black bourbon. "Chandler, let's you and me have a drink." He rummaged around and found two glasses that were almost clean. He filled both and pushed one across the

desk top.

"To the old times," he said. We tossed off and put the empties down and looked at each other. There was nothing more to say.

I stood up. "Thanks, buddy," I said. "You take care of yourself."

It seemed like there ought to be more to say, over the last drink I would ever have with my best friend.

But there wasn't.

"You didn't tell me he had a bomb in his brains," I said.

We were standing on her patio again. It was late morning, almost noon, and a high sun beat down on the Golden Gate, turning the bridge and its necklace of bubble condos into a line of red fire over the water. A freshening breeze off the ocean brought salt and the smell of fish to our high place.

There was a sterling champagne bucket between us, cradling a bottle of Dom Perignon. She held a delicate crystal flute glass in her hand and watched the tiny bubbles rise. I'd taken a cab. The guards at the Wall stopped me, of course, but only for a moment. They had me put my wrist into a box, then snapped quick salutes and stepped away. "Have a good day, Mr. Chandler," they'd said in unison.

Three days before they'd probably have shot me.

"Is it important?" she said. She sounded worried, as if she was wondering what else she'd forgotten.

"Anything could be important. Listen, Marie, I'm not a real detective. I've had some training in this and that, done some favors for people. But I'm not a pro. So I do things my way. Usually, you find out things by checking everything, especially the little stuff. Eventually something doesn't fit. Or something does. Either way, you go on from there. But this guy was killed with his own hardwiring. Don't you think that's relevant?"

"Oscar," she said. "Oscar Verrazano."

"That was his name, Oscar,"

"Oh." I waited, "Did you like him?"

She tasted her champagne. "He was a good man, I suppose. Loyal. He'd

been with me a long time, always did his job. There was no reason on earth for him to . . . to -"

I touched her shoulder. "I have to ask things, Marie. Even painful things. Did you put the bomb in his skull?"

She faced me, her blue eyes wide and blank in the sunlight. "Well, of course. It was standard. It was - uh - three years ago. New tech."

I nodded patiently. "So tell me about it. Why did you do it? How did it work?"

She turned away. The wind whipped at her voice so I had to strain to make her out. "We Changers are paranoid people, Chandler. You don't understand how much, or why, yet, but you will. We have to be very certain of the people around us. He agreed to it, you know. I've got the release forms around here somewhere, if you want to see. He signed them without a second thought. He wanted to be trusted."

"Go on."

"He was hooked into CeeNet. Not all the way, but he could access certain areas, and I could communicate with him through the Net. It was more . . . convenient. But because he was hooked in to potentially sensitive data, there had to be safeguards. The bomb was one of them. If he tried to reveal something he shouldn't, then, well -" Her shoulders moved suddenly. I wondered if she was reliving it. What did it look like, to have a man's head blow up in front of you?"

I got the picture. "You know, the cops think you did it." She was shocked. "What? But why?"

"They don't like Changers, I don't think. And it was a Changer device that killed him. In a Changer vehicle, With a Changer in the back seat,"

She finished her champagne and poured another, "Do you think I killed him?"

"I don't know. Did vou?"

She drank the whole glass in a single gulp. "Only the Net can trigger the bomb, Chandler. And only under certain very special circumstances. Don't you see? It wasn't a protection for me. It was to safeguard the Net."

"Can you prove that?"

"If I have to Do I?"

I sensed some kind of test. She was staring at me intently, "No," I said. "You don't"

The tension drained from her face, "You'll understand, Chandler, Soon enough. They were trying to kill me. It was a warning, that's all."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

When you lie a lot yourself, you become attuned to the signs. I was a liar. And so was she.

"Okav," I said. "I'll keep poking. One more thing. That maserlimo flies itself. Why did you need a chauffeur?"

She smiled then, a hard-edged little flip of very white teeth. "Status, Chandler, Only status. I have a chauffeur I don't need for a car I can't drive. Status."

"That's all?"

She seemed genuinely puzzled. "How else could you tell us from the rest of the herd?" She paused. "You want a drink?"

"No," I said. "Not today." That was a lie, too. I did, very much. But not with her.

I went to the local branch of the public library that afternoon. It's quiet inside, and it's free. You see a lot of the older soaks there, hiding behind newspapers or just plain sleeping it off. Sometimes they scare me, those real alkies. They were what happened if you couldn't handle your booze.

I still hadn't plugged in, or punched in, or whatever the Bobby was supposed to do for me, although I'd noticed a persistent itching underneath the bulge on the gold band, like a scab that needed scratching. I ignored it as well as I could. But since the Bobby couldn't help me yet, I had to use what was at hand. The library wasn't perfect, but you could find out a surprising amount of information if you knew how to use the machines properly.

I set up searches on Verrazano, Oscar; DeBakey, Marie; and DeBakey, Theodore; otherwise known as Terrible Teddy. I don't know why I threw her father in, just a hunch. But you learn to follow your hunches. I also did scans on Bobbies and the CeeNet, and an overview on Changers in general.

The resulting hardcopy was over two inches thick. The search was free, but you had to pay for paper. I used some of the money Marie had given me. She said that when I had access to the Net, I could tap her accounts directly, within limits. She hadn't told me what the limits were. I supposed I would find out.

I bundled the printout under my arm and started walking for home. Stopped at the corner store and bought a bag of potato chips, a pack of bologna, and a loaf of seven-grain bread. Health food fanatic, that's me. Paused a moment in front of Keller's, but didn't go in. Everybody there knew about the Bobby now, and while they left me alone, they stared. I was different than they were. Before, I'd been one of them. Now I wasn't.

I wasn't sure what I was anymore. It was a strange, almost scary sensation. Neither fish nor fowl. Just Chandler.

Back home I made two sandwiches, cracked some ice into a glass, and filled it with McCallan's. I munched and sipped as I read the printouts. I hadn't expected much, and I didn't get much. Not about Oscar the clunker, at least. He was still a cioher. But there were a few surprises.

Theodore Allen DeBakey had been born a poor boy in San Francisco's Tenderloin in 1927. Bootstrapped himself up, bought timber originally, then switched to mines and finally newspapers. His company still owned several news services, but most of their money was in high tech. Silicon Val-

ley, that kind of thing. Which made sense. He'd been one of the original investors in Robert Schollander's company, RobiRobot, the firm that had developed Bobbies in the first place. I figured he'd been one of the first to have a Bobby. Very high-powered man. The puzzle was, according to his birth date, he'd be over ninety today. But I didn't find any obituary. Could he have lived this long? Was he in some kind of sanitarium someplace, waiting to die?

I figured out a sort of answer when I checked on Marie. She'd been his only child, issue of a marriage that ended twelve years after her birth. Some kind of scandal, about which the printouts were vague. When Terrible Teddy was thirty. Which made her seventy years old.

eddy was thirty. Which made her seventy years old Which was bullshit.

Or was it?

Or was it?

I still didn't know what a Bobby could do, but I was beginning to see that was the wrong question. The right one was, what *couldn't* a Bobby do? It seemed to beat the hell out of a face-lift. I'd been there, If Marie De-

Bakey was seventy, her body sure as hell didn't know it.

I finished the sandwiches, put the plate in my wheezy dishwasher, and returned to my chair. This time I didn't bother with ice. Just a bottle and a glass. The itching beneath my Bobby had turned into a sharp, almost burning sensation. And my vision seemed kind of blurry.

I filled the glass, slugged it down, and filled it again. I knew what to do about blurry vision.

When you can't beat them, you join them.

Changers. Over time, names lose their real meaning. Do you know why New York is called the Empire State? I don't either. The word meant something once, but nobody remembers.

If I'd stop to think about it, I'd have guessed they called them Changers because they changed things. Changers owned high tech. It was their companies that had made the world what it is today. That would have been my guess.

It would have been dead wrong.

Changers are called that because they do. They have changed *themselves*. Welcome to the wonderful world of nanotechnology.

I was deep into the pitch and swing of things, with that fine rhythm only an experienced drinker can establish, a careful balance between coma and sharpness where all the edges are blurred and you can taste the peat from the bogs in the scotch. Sitting in my chair, sipping, watching the wall in front of me, humming a mindless tune.

It started at the base of my skull and moved up. A sudden flowing warmth. The room brightened and then winked out, like a video screen punched off.

Darkness.

I felt nothing. The taste of scotch was gone. The feel of my butt on the chair. The glass in my hand, All gone, I hung in the darkness, too startled to be frightened.

And then I began to see the lights.

Dim at first, fuzzy, far away. Growing brighter. It was like standing at a junction of a million tunnels, and down each tunnel was rushing a train.

Light exploded over me in a soundless white fury. I screamed. It tossed me and turned me like a chip on a flood. The pressure of the light was like an endless bellow.

Finally, something began to penetrate. A thoughtless thought, meaning without information. I could manipulate the light. Slowly, with hands that weren't hands. I tugged at the stuff around me. Pushed it, shoved it. Arranged it.

Found a door and opened it.

Stepped through.

Stepped into the tacky splendor of my own brain. Hello, Chandler.

Hello.

It smelled brown and tasted of thunder. Soundless lightning shrieked.

- click -

Was back out, and now I heard the voices. A vast, soothing babble. Limitless sounds, words without end. An ocean of words. Who were they talking Sot

Nobody. Everybody.

They were talking to me.

I had finally broken through, and the Net had caught my infinite fall.

Welcome to CeeNet, Chandler.

Welcome, Changer.

When I opened my eyes, my room was unaltered. The scabrous paper on the walls still peeled in curly strips of faded blue. My carpet still smelled of smoke and scotch and ancient perspiration. The single window overlooking the street was still streaked with greasy yellow phlegm.

All the same. All totally different.

Because I was. I had Changed. And I understood.

I simply sat for a while, listening to the sound of my own breathing. The McCallan's bottle was almost empty. I picked it up and finished it off. No problem there. I could drink ten more if I wanted, and awaken the next morning as healthy and clear-eyed as a ten-year-old. Infinitely tiny molecular machines in my body would scavenge the alcohol, break the molecules into smaller, harmless structures, and expel them. Other machines would repair any cellular damage that might be caused if I allowed the alcohol to do its work. Like getting me drunk.

The only thing that would happen is I would sweat a lot.

I suppose every Changer has this moment, this blinding instant when it all begins. The terror of the infinite vista opening like the eye of God. But Changers have other Changers around to help, to explain, to guide. Marie had left me alone to deal with it by myself, and I didn't thank her for it. In fact, perhaps I hated her just a little bit.

But it was over.

And just beginning.

So much data had crowded into my brain, or was on ready tap from other sources, that it took me a while to sort out what I needed. But finally, I was ready to access the great archive that was the Hypertexted Group Data Base, sometimes called CeeNet.

Everything in that data base was cross-linked, sometimes in thousands of ways, to everything else. You could pursue a bit of information down a million twisting paths. I understood that experienced Changers could do it directly, dancing like fairies through endless fields of information, plucking what they wished, discarding the rest. I wasn't that experienced. I settled for something more primitive. I leaned back and closed my eves.

Something very like a huge monitor screen appeared in glowing green lines on the back of my eyelids. I could manipulate the screen simply by thinking about what I wanted. I tried it out.

"DeBakey, Marie," I directed.

Obediently, a slow roll of information drifted across the darkness. By picking one bit of data and asking a question, I would bring up other relevant information. And thus I tracked my mistress, my benefactor, down the hidden trails of her life.

I opened my eyes some time later and realized I was ravenously hungry. But when I stood up, my new suit was soaked with sweat. I glanced at the empty bottle of McCallan's. I was only mildly high, just a pleasant buzz. I realized I could adjust that to any level I desired, but right now it was fine.

I shucked out of the suit and pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a clean white shirt. I didn't bother with a tie or jacket. Although I was going to the most expensive restaurant in town, I didn't feel any need to dress up.

The ring of gold on my wrist was all the reservation I would ever need.

Changer, you have Changed yourself.

That is the true meaning of the word.

At last I understood.

Occasionally when I read about drunks in literature, I notice they always have a reason for becoming that way. A broken love affair, a dead child, an injury of some kind. Some terrible loss sets off their dance with the jug. But it really isn't like that. Not with me, at least. I always drank pretty good, and after a while I drank all the time. Habit. Addiction. Call it what you will. Nothing triggered it. I'd stopped even looking for reasons. I drank because I

did. And, of course, I could quit any time. But old habits die hard.

Masarini's was on top of Nob Hill, and if you were lucky, you could get a reservation for two months down the road. Unless you wore a gold band on your wrist.

The maitre d' bowed me to a table, ummed and ahhed about my lack of a tie, then decided it didn't matter. I paid him no attention and ordered a double McCallan's.

"Keep them coming," I told him.

"Of course, sir," he said. He seemed happy to see me. He'd never seen me before in his life.

I was in a bright, brittle, hard-drinking mood. The service in Masarini's was famed for impeccability, and justly so. Every time I placed an empty glass on the spotless white linen, a full one magically replaced it.

Off and on while I waited, I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. Nobody paid me any attention. Changers do what they want. The scotch was

wonderful. I was wonderful. And I was working.

I was amazed at the amount of data I could learn to handle. I remembered the pitiful stack of printouts I'd carried home from the library. The entire pile was but a moment's consideration in my new condition. I flicked through the subjects I hadn't read then and paused, surprised.

Linked my way into some old history, then more recent stuff. Yes. No

wonder Changers were paranoid.

Why do only a few become Changers? Why does a Bobby cost twenty mil-

lion dollars? Interesting questions with interesting answers.

Back at the beginning of the nanotech era, there was a great deal of fear that the technology might well destroy the planet. Thoughful people raised a specter of technology gone wild, infinitely powerful computers and manufacturing complexes in the hands of unturored barbarians. Science has always been ambivalent about the masses. On the one hand, research creates an unbounded cornucopia of new things for which masses are necessary. After all, somebody has to buy the stuff. On the other hand, scientists have a strong bent toward the priesthood. The mysteries of science are not for the unwashed many. There is an air of tension, and it comes from both sides. The untutored majority fears that science will invent their destruction, while the scientists fear that the proles will destroy science with their ignorance. There is a certain amount of right on both sides.

However. We have had the tiny machines for almost twenty years now, and mankind has neither destroyed itself nor destroyed science. What hap-

pened?

What happened with the nuclear bomb? Similar fears were rampant during the terrorist decades. Everybody's nightmare. Some fanatic yahoo would build an atomic weapon in his basement and blow up New York. It never happened.

But why not? Simple.

The technology was too expensive. Expensive in time, in money, in knowledge, in life. Detailed instructions for building such a weapon were even openly published, for Christ's sake. But nobody built the bomb.

Because plutonium was relatively well guarded. Because the other uranium isotopes were hard to make. Because they were deadly. Because alternate methods were uncertain. Because governments were paranoid.

Because of a million reasons

And a nuclear weapon was as complicated as a sharp stick, compared to a Bobby, A full high-tech complex, mature and developed, was necessary to even contemplate building such a thing. And who owned such factories and laboratories?

Of course. The same people who always own things. Rich people.

Rich people ended up with the technology, and they protected it with a ferocity that made atomic weapons seem as open and free as lollinops.

Sure, maybe if you were extraordinarily resourceful you could find blueprints. Even if you did, you weren't going to brew up a Bobby in your basement.

But you could get one if you wanted. Anybody could. All you needed was twenty million bucks.

Only the western technocracies had so far developed the technology, and they sold it on their terms. Come one, come all, but bring the money. It was a safety valve. As long as people thought they might have a chance to buy a Bobby, they wouldn't burn down the store. The odds were insane, but it wasn't a stupid setup. Look how many people poured money into the lottery. There's one born every minute.

With very few exceptions, rich and Changer meant the same thing. But I was one of the exceptions.

There had to be a reason.

I didn't think it was a good one.

Like all Changers, I had become paranoid myself. So I made the call I should have made all along.

"This could be very dangerous, Mr. Chandler."

"Just Chandler. That's okav."

"It would be best if you could drink a lot."

"That's okay, too."

She served dinner on the patio. It struck me that I hadn't seen much of the house. I doubted that I would, now.

"Champagne?"

"No thanks," I said. "I'll dance with the guy that brung me." She smiled. "Is that a joke?"

"I think so."

Her face was as close to haggard as a Changer's face could be. Something

thick and opaque moved deep behind her eyes. Her gestures were quick as knives, and as sharp. I was amazed she'd fooled me as long as she had.

For it had been all out in front of me. Changers don't indulge in charity. Not on that level

I finished the duckling. As before, she'd cooked everything herself. The vast house behind us was echoing and empty.

She poured her own champagne almost as an afterthought. Her mind was miles away. In more ways than one.

"How do you feel?"

I nipped down yet another double scotch and reached for a refill. My Bobby was struggling hard to keep up. I was sweating like a sow and feeling the chill in the winds off the bay. "A little cold," I said. "It's windy. You want to go inside?"

I tried to put an appropriate leer in my voice.

She nodded. "Of course. I don't want you to get sick."

"No, me neither," I said.

Inside meant only one thing. I wondered how she would do it.

I took both her and the bottle to bed.

"Do you have to do that while we -"

"I like to drink. Do you mind?"



"Yes!"

"Sorry." I placed the bottle on a nightstand where it was handy. Then I rolled over and put my arms around her. It was almost the hardest thing I've done in my life. Almost. The next thing would be the hardest.

I was in her when she came into me. It was very neatly done. Even though I was expecting something, it took me by surprise. Our sweaty tangle winked out, and I stood in a different place.

It was a tall room with broad, open doorways at one end. Long, silky curtains swirled in a soft breeze. I smelled magnolias, and wondered whose memory this was.

There was a great faceted chandelier overhead. It glowed softly and cast a thousand shadows. Mirrors lined the walls, doors into forever.

He turned from the windows and walked over to me.

Tall man with hunter's eyes, the eyes of a wolf or a hawk. Dark hair combed straight back. Good shoulders. He walked with a heavy inevitability, graceful and ponderous. He was comfortable with his body, with his life. With his unmeasurable power.

He smiled. "You've Changed," he said.

"You noticed?"

"Of course. Did you think you could hide it from me?"

I shrugged.

He moved closer. "Have you figured it out yet?"

I nodded. "I think so. I was awfully stupid, wasn't I?"

"Not really. It was difficult if you weren't a Changer. You adapted quickly. It was a surprise."

I remembered our first meeting. "Did you plan for me? Is that why you crashed the limo there?"

His eyebrows rose. "Plan for you? Of course not. You showed up. I decided you would do as well as anybody."

So he'd just played it by ear. Arrogant. But then, he would be arrogant. "What happened to Oscar Verrazano?"

He paused. "Who?"

"You lie. The chauffeur. What happened to him?"

He shook his head slightly, puzzled. "He died. In the wreck."

I sighed. "No, he didn't. I don't know when he died, or if he did, but it wasn't in the wreck. How did you get his template? Did he help you? Work with you?"

"You know quite a bit, don't you?" An ugly sheen ghosted across his face. "But how do you know it?"

"I don't know this. That's why I'm asking. As for the rest, it didn't take that much. Not after I thought about it. You gave me a Bobby. Drank with me, had sex with me. A Changer, and me a bum. There had to be a reason. Then I Changed and got on the Net. Read the family history. Why would Marie want me? And want me Changed? No reason. Unless she wasn't

Marie. I learned that was possible. But if Marie wasn't Marie, then who was she? The best candidate was somebody close to her. Real close. And guess who that was?" I paused. "It's funny. I couldn't have figured it out without being Changed and getting on the Net. Learning what Changers could really do. Changers change, Teddy. The templates are mental and physical. Once I realized that, the rest was easy." I stared at him. "You couldn't get what you wanted without changing me. So you cut your own filthy throst. Don't you think that's kind of funny?"

"Ah. Cut my throat, Chandler? I think not. But you want answers?" His voice was thick with scorn. "Why not? You won't be telling anybody. I had Verrazano's template made through the Net, of course. Through his hardwiring. And ves, he helped."

I quit feeling sorry for Oscar Verrazano, wherever he was. Probably living in luxury on a tropical island somewhere. Or buried under it. Teddy could afford either one. "Why, Teddy? Do you miss her that much?"

And then his urbane mask collapsed, and the madness behind it peeked out slyly. His voice seemed to stretch, and tiny whining sounds vibrated along it.

"She wanted it to end. After sixty years she wanted it to end. I loved her, Chandler. You could never understand."

"No, I suppose I couldn't. I did a little research. It has been that long, hasn't it? Since her mother left you. The scandal. Child molestation, wasn't it? But you managed to hush it up. Jesus, Teddy, she was only twelve years old. You never even gave her a chance."

"She loved me!"

"Oh, I'm sure little Marie did. All little girls love their fathers. But she finally stopped, didn't she? And so you killed her. You're a sick mess, aren't

He turned away and paced quickly back to the window. "Go on. Say whatever. It doesn't mean anything now."

"No. But I'm glad I figured it out. You own a big piece of Robi, don't you? So I suppose you'd have access to the newest technologies. Changers are real hard to kill. You couldn't shoot her or poison her. The Bobby would take care of anything like that. Unless you changed her entirely. Put a different template on, gave her a different brain even. If there's a way to verpower someone's Bobby, you'd know about it, wouldn't you? For God's sake, Teddy, It worked, didn't it? You turned her into the chauffeur. Used his physical template. But his body didn't have the nanotech protection, the about the properties of the prop

I took a deep, shuddering breath. "You had no servants. Because you weren't her, you just looked like her. You couldn't take the chance one of

them would figure it out. And me. I was the perfect fool, wasn't I? A drunk who'd be so thrilled with a Bobby I'd never think about any of the weirdness. You must have been ecstatic. Lucky Teddy."

His back was to me, as rigid as a plate of steel. He hovered there a moment and finally turned. When he came to me this time, he moved like a mechanical man. His smile winked on and off like a searchlight. "Do you feel any-

thing yet?"

I sucked in a deep breath. "Should I?"

"Yes," he snarled, and then his arms were around me, tight as steel bands. I could feel it as he reached deep into the Net, his Bobby gathering her file template like a lightning bolt. Ready to hurl it through my own Bobby into my genes, into all the trillions of machines in my cells awaiting orders. An old template, the pattern of a woman who still loved her daddy very, very much, body and mind.

"Just relax," he husked in my ear. "It will be over soon." His voice went

dreamy. "And you'll be back, my darling. My precious. . . "

I felt my body begin to change. Rivers of sweat poured off me. I shivered, then began to burn with fever. He crushed me to him, squeezing me tighter, while my cells danced a gayotte of insanity.

Had it been like this for Marie, when he changed her into Oscar Verrazano?

I screamed.

My breasts. My beautiful breasts.

We awoke.

Naked, he was a hairy, ugly beast. Older than he looked in the dream. He was an evil man, and the marks of it, as sure as the marks of my sea of booze, showed in his face. I don't know how long I was out. Long enough for him to Change into his real form. The bed was soaked with sweat. Physical Changing is an energy-intensive process. It requires a lot of cooling.

He was pale. "You," he said. "You."

I reached for the scotch and swallowed long. The liquid burned my throat. "Me," I said. "That's right."

"Impossible!"

"What? That Marie's template didn't work? That you didn't turn me into her? I'm a drunk, Teddy." I rolled on my side and stared at him. He shied away, his eyes widening.

"You drink, Teddy, but you don't have hangovers. Or the morning heaves. Or the night sweats. Or blackouts. You know what a blackout is, Teddy?"

He stared at me as if I were a deadly insect. Perhaps I was. "Two kinds of memory. Short term is an electrical phenomenon. Long term is RNA coding. When a drunk blacks out, he fucks up both kinds. It's the only kind of memory you can't recover. Gone forever. The kind of RNA that nanomachines work with. The cellular machines. Your Bobby couldn't get through, Teddy. Cause I'm a drunk. How about that, you murderous fuck?"

He lunged for me then, but the man I'd called that afternoon was with us now. With two others. They peeled him off me and stood him up and took him away.

I sat up on the edge of the bed. He took my hand and pulled me upright. I

was soaked with sweat and weak as a baby.

"That was very risky," the man said. He looked quite young, but there was something about him Cementhead Shedleski would have recognized. Even with the gold band on his wrist. A cop is a cop. They could have shared a beer together and toasted the destruction of crooks. "Are you all right?"

I took an enormous swig from the bottle. "I am now," I said.

They let me keep the Bobby. I don't know why. It would have probably killed me to remove it, but I don't think that would have bothered them much. Maybe CeeNet told them to. CeeNet runs everything, anyway.

Me? I earn a good buck doing consulting work for non-Changer companies. And I play the markets, with the vast advantage of CeeNet backing me up. There are only a couple hundred thousand Changers at the moment. We live on the rest of humanity like wampires. Or werewolves. Any of the shapeshifters from humanity's nightmares. That may seem wrong, but consider the alternatives.

And maybe even this will change. Perhaps we Changers will find a way to lose our paranoia, give up the murderous hoarding of our powers. I wonder, though. People don't usually relinquish the things they value without a fight. They need a push. Sometimes, I think I might have something to do with the pushing. Down the road a bit, perhaps. I wasn't born to godhood. It gives me an edge. And a reason.

What a joke. Chandler the drunken derelict, worried about the future of mankind. But I don't know. Just because people Change doesn't mean they can't change. Like, I don't see Herbie anymore. Or Cementhead Shedleski either. I was right about that.

I don't go to Keller's.

I told Teddy DeBakey that he wasn't a drunk. He didn't have hangovers, sweats, heaves, blackouts.

Nor do I.

Maybe that's why the last time I tasted scotch was almost ten years ago. I could if I wanted to. It can't hurt me. But I don't. I get through my nights on my own now.

That's the biggest change.

And the best, Because it wasn't the Bobby.

It was me

THE LITERARY CAREER OF W. T. OUICK Current Directions . . .

The title of my story, "Whatever Gets You Through the Night," at first seems to have little to do with the general plot of the piece. It does, however, have a great deal to do with my concept of the story, since stories of all kinds — short, medium, and long — are what has gotten me through some very long nights. At first, I read them. Later, I wrote them.

Most of my stories begin with a technical extrapolation — an "if this goes on" sort of thing, placed into a milieu that generates a plot that illustrates my premise — usually a "problem" that must be "solved" — and characters are more or less created to serve the demands of the story. In the case of this story, though, Chandler came first. I saw him in darkness, a hard, competent man blurred by alcohol. In my mind's eye I could see him at his breakfast of scotch and ice cubes, playing a little game with himself - can he pretend for one more day that everything is okay, that his life has not completely collapsed? In alcohol treatment circles, this particular delusion is known as denial. Chandler has about an average case of it.

So there I was, with this sot who wouldn't let go of me, and nowhere to put him — the opposite of my usual problem of having to create characters for a plot that already exists. At the time I wrote this piece — June of 1988 — I was fascinated with the possibilities of nanotechnology, K. Eric Drexler had just begun to create a wide awareness of this new branch of science in the general SF populace, and I wanted to write a story dealing with it. So I put Chandler, bottle of scotch and all, into a nanotechnological world - and the central fact of that world was change.

After I had finished the story, I noticed that, even when Chandler was physically in the light, he still seemed shrouded by dark. I think it was a side effect of the booze. How do I know this? I've seen the same thing myself. during the series of small wars of the soul I fought over the same battlefields.

This story is not upbeat. I don't feel it's downbeat, but others have disagreed with me. Well, okay, Chandler doesn't solve his, or the world's, problems by the end of act three. There are no neat solutions. Most of the people in the story aren't very nice, and the "good guys" are only good in context. Sort of like real life. If there's a moral to the thing, it is only that we, like Chandler, will get through our particular night if we do it ourselves. There must be the will to change, and humanity must somehow develop it - just as any drunk must hit bottom and climb up under his own power. In the end, we must all do it ourselves. Technology, even the magic of nanotechnology, is only a tool, not a magic wand.

I wrote "Whatever Gets You Through the Night" a long time ago, or so it seems. What's been going on since? My second and third novels came out, and about the time you read this, my fourth book, Systems, should just be hitting the stands. The final book in the Dream Trio. Dreams of Life and Death, is due in September 1990. In August of this year, I finished a quartermillion-word novel, a military-political techno-thriller called Swift Sword, which treats a hypothetical war between Israel and Syria involving the use of nuclear weapons. I'm now working on Chains of Light, the first of a series called The Luciferian Chronicles. The hero of this opus begins as a thirteenyear-old hypertexted personality, and finishes, five books later, as Emperor of the known and unknown universes. I predict a certain amount of hightech derring-do in this one.

Oh, and with thanks to Joel Rosenberg - the answer to the most important question. XyWrite 3+ on an Optima clone 286.

... and Past Achievements

Dreams of Flesh and Sand. Signet, April 1988.

"Lazarus," short story. Amazing Stories: November 1988.

Dreams of Gods and Men. Signet, February 1989.

Yesterday's Pawn. Signet, June 1989.

Systems. Signet, November 1989.



THE FINAL GIFT by Michael A. Stackpole art: Daniel R. Horne



The author not only writes fiction but also designs computer and role-playing games. His computer games Wasteland and Bards Tale III: The Thief of Fate have recently won national awards. Fasa Corporation has published three of his novels and has purchased his latest trilogy.

In his spare time, the author serves as the chairman of the Phoenix Skeptics and, in that position, helps investigate claims of the paranormal. The youth cleared his throat as he waited in the doorway. He'd learned well not to speak until I gave him leave. I suppressed a smile as I narrowed my old, tired eyes, squinted one last time at the stars, and reconfirmed the story I'd read there countless times before. I made the last few notes on the wax tablet with my sylus, then I turned to face him.

I saw nothing but a clean-limbed outline silhouetted against the light from below. He waited anxiously to tell me what I'd heard taking place down in the courtyard. He nearly burst with excitement but, mature beyond his seven years, he restrained himself. Not one of my students, not even Balthasar, has shown such self-control, I thought to myself, and none have ever needed so much of it before him.

I let a thin whisp of smile twist my lips just enough for him to notice, then

I nodded. "They have finally come?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, Master, they have arrived. The one from the orient brought you tea, and I have it brewing."

He stepped forward to help guide me down the stairs, but I waved him back. "Go see to their needs. Serve them the tea, then leave them. I will address them alone?"

He smiled. "Do you wish me to prepare your things for the journey?"

Smart lad, I laughed to myself. I shook my head slowly, "There is no

need."

He'd half turned back toward the stairs, and the yellow tallow light flickered shadows across his puzzled face. "But they said you would go with them."

"Go do what I told you, and think no more of it." I turned and looked up at that star, the one burning like a torch at midnight. Just as strongly as it beckoned them on, it pinned me in my place. Terrible star! I cursed, I wish your light would not shine so brightly.

Even without the youth's help, I climbed down the worn stairs without mishap. Thoughtfully, the boy'd left lamps burning so their light allowed me passage from one illuminated sphere to the next, but he should have known better than to waste the oil. I'd lived my entire life within these walls. My senses would not fail me, and the building itself would never betray me. No, to fall and die, that would be too easy an escape.

They stood, the three of them, when I entered the room, and they were kind enough to mouth lies about how hale and hearty I looked. They were resplendent in their robes of silk and cloth of gold. Though each of them had grown and aged, I could still see in them the children I'd trained so long ago. Instantly, they dropped to their knees in a rustle of cloth even I could hear, but I held a hand out to forestall any further contradictions about my condition, or any efforts to touch what little vanity I had left in me.

"Please, my kings, please return to your chairs. We have much to discuss." I paused while they reseated themselves and adjusted their clothing.

"It is good to see the three of you again, for this final time. I will not be going with you."

Surprise widened their eyes, and emotion rode on faces unaccustomed to showing it. At court, any of these men would have been an implacable instrument of wisdom, compassion, or justice without revealing anything to those they judged; but here, with me, they became half-trained scholars wrestling with minor problems as if they were titanic monsters, as they had done here vears ago."

Jasper, the youngest who had traveled here from far Tarshish, could not contain himself. "Why? Why will you not join us in this thing you have prepared us for?" Betrayal seeped into his voice and told me the hot-blooded passions of his nation had nibbled away at my training.

Even before I spoke, I knew Balthazar and Melchior anticipated my answer. I smiled at them and bowed my head in a silent salute. Jasper, impulsive but not a dullard, suddenly understood and blushed.

"Could you imagine, Jasper, having asked that question when you left me so long ago?" I shook my head in a mild rebuke. "Use what I gave you; use the training and pierce the mystery of my refusal." I looked to the others and wordlessly invited them to help their companion. "Share what you know with the others, and perhaps you will see why I cannot go."

Jasper swallowed thickly, then bowed his head to me and began to speak.
"As I was bidden, I have studied the one we seek and delved into his ancestry. He is noble born, to be sure, for his mother comes from the House of David, and he will be every bit a king in blood as any of us are." The King of Tarshish glanced up, and I recognized the look of confusion on his face from long ago.

Melchior, the dark Nubian, likewise caught Jasper's hesitation. "You say nothing of his father."

Jasper shook his head. "The stars confuse me. They tell me he has two fathers. Of one I see nothing, as if the stars cannot contain his story. The ther, the one I see guiding his early days, is a good man, also of the House of David. I would take this as a good omen, a fulfillment of the stories, but I fear this man is not his true father."

Melchior would have offered a solution to the mystery, but I shook my head almost imperceptibly, and he acceded to my unvoiced request. "What did you bring him as a gift?" I asked, encouraging Jasper to forget his paradox

Jasper's face brightened. "I have brought him gold, Master."

"Practical as always, Jasper," laughed Balthazar.

Jasper's face flushed again, but he rose to the challenge. "I selected that gift as suitable for a babe of his blood, and because gold is pure and incorruptible. This is the sort of man I sense coming from so noble a beginning, hence an appropriate gift."

He looked to me for agreement and praise. I gave him both in a solemn

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nod, but turned toward Melchior to forestall Jaspar's demand for the reasons behind my decision not to accompany them. "Melchior, tell what you have learned?"

The Nubian smiled and flashed bright eyes and white teeth at me. "As I was asked, I have followed the stars' telling of his childhood." Melchion ondded toward Jasper. "You are right, oh King of Tarshish, for this will be a remarkable man. As a child, he is extraordinary in his abilities and devotion to studies. I saw no duality as far as his father was concerned. I saw a boy who loves his parents and who, after helping his father and brothers in the carpentry shop, turns to studies of things ancient and holy. By the time his people count him a man, he will possess the wisdom of an elder. I would guess he becomes a great teacher."

Melchior fixed me with an ebon-eyed stare, for I was to study the man's adult life, but I ignored his demand to have his speculation confirmed. "And what do you offer this miracle child, Melchior of Nubia?"

Frustration bunched muscles at his jaws, but he banished it and once again acknowledged me his master. "I bring him frankincense. Useful in sacrifice, it can also be burned to banish evil demons, and the sweet scent encourages studious behavior." The Nubian smiled wryly and looked at Balthazar. "And, as the King of Chaldaea would note, it is valued and could be traded for supplies needed to further his studies."

Balthazar accepted without prompting his part in the discussion. My eldest pupil, his hair and beard were nearly bone-white, but aside from that he had not changed. He was still the practical, calculating man; as cynical a soul as ever born to woman. He stood as he had done to lecture the others so long ago, and explained his studies.

"As the master charged me, I studied his legacy and puzzled out what his life will mean to the world." Balthazar smiled slyly and turned to me. "You asked me to study the effects of his life because, had one of the others said what I will say. I would never have believed it."

I nodded, and he turned back to the others. "This man is mortal, in one sense, and will die. But he will not stay dead; he will rise from the tomb and return to confirm the veracity of his teachings. He will be a god then, and his disciples will spread throughout the world. They will topple old empires and create new ones. They will do good things in his name, and they will do evil defending him, but, those who are true to his life and message, they will make the world into a paradise."

Jasper and Melchior stared at Balthazar, for what he was saying horrified them. Could this man, they wondered, this man we have studied defeat death and have so much power? Balthazar confirmed their fears with a slow nod, then turned back to me. "And what did I bring him for a giff, Master? I brought myrrh so they can anoint his body when he dies."

Jasper laughed. "Hardly practical, your gift, Balthazar, for you yourself say he will not remain dead. He returns a god."

Balthazar narrowed his eyes until they appeared bare slivers of gray. "I give him myrrh, for its scent will stay with him in the grave and will remind him, when he returns, he was once a man."

I levered myself up out of my chair and smiled at my students. "You have seen correctly and chosen your gifts well. Now you must proceed with your journey so you will arrive in time."

Jasper stood but showed no intention of leaving. "Master, you have not told us why you will not join us."

Balthazar bowed and passed between me and the King of Tarshish. He gently took Jasper's arm and steered him toward the door. "He has told us, Jasper; you did not hear." He looked back at me and swallowed past a lump in his throat that told me he'd studied more than he should have. "He cannot come because his stiff for this child is not ready wet."

Jasper thought to protest, but my curt nod and Balthazar's grip on his elbow deterred him. He bowed his head to me, as did Melchior, and the three kings left my home.

The boy found me once again on the roof staring at the stars. Each time I looked at them, half-hoping my creeping blindness would swallow one that would change the story they told, I only read again the tale of pain and suffering that sapped my strength and croded my will. But, just as I'd read his story in the stars, I had read of my pupils and of myself.

Bless you, Balthazar, for making your attempt to accept my burden.

I snorted and shivered, then turned to the boy. "Yes, what is it?" Mist trailed from his mouth as he replied. "The eldest, King Balthazar,

said you would want to speak with me."

The weight of eternity forced me to sit on the roof's edge. "Yes, he is cor-

rect. Come here." I pointed to a spot at my feet and forced a smile on my face so I would betray nothing. It was finally time to prepare my gift.

The boy looked up at me, his face innocent and guileless. So trusting, so smart. My gift, the gift that binds all the others.

"One day you will travel from here and meet a man. You will find, Judas, he is a very special man and he will call you friend. . . ."



by George Zebrowski art: Janet Aulisio

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Lenin is a rotten little incessant intriguer'. . He just wants power. He ought to be killed by some moral sanitary authority.

— H. G. Wells

(Letter dated July 1918, sent to the New York Week) Review)

l

In 1918, Sidney Reilly, who had worked as a British agent against the Germans and Japanese, returned to our newly formed Soviet Russia. He was again working for England and her allies, but this time he was also out for himself, intending to assassinate Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and bring himself to power at the head of the regime that he imagined his homeland deserted.

Jew though he was, Reilly saw himself as a Russian coming home to make good. It angered him that another expatriot, Lenin, had gotten there first — with German help, and with what Reilly considered suspect motives. Reilly was convinced that his own vision was the proper response to the problems of life in Russia, which, as Sigmund Rosenblum, a bastard born in Odessa, he had escaped in his youth. He believed that the right man could, with sufficient thought and preparation, make of history his own handiwork.

It was obvious to me that Reilly's thinking was a curious patchwork of ideas, daring and naive at the same time, but lacking the systematic approach of a genuine scientific philosophy. His distaste for the bourgeois society that had oppressed him in his childhood was real, but he had developed a raste for its nlessures.

Of course, Reilly knew that he was sent in as a tool of the British and their allies, who opposed Bolshevism from the outset, and he let them continue to think that they could count on him, for at least as long as his aims would not conflict with theirs. Lenin himself had been eased back into Russia by the



Germans, who hoped that he would take Russia out of the war in Europe. No German agent could have done that job better. Reilly was determined to remove or kill Lenin, as the prelude to a new Russia. What that Russia would be was not clear. The best that I could say about Reilly's intentions was that he was not a Carrist.

There was an undeniable effectiveness in Reilly, of which he was keenly aware. He was not a mere power-seeker, even though he took pride in his physical prowess and craft as a secret agent; to see him as out for personal gain would be to underestimate the danger that he posed to those of us who understand power more fully than he did.

Reilly compared himself to Lenin. They had both been exiles from their homeland, dreaming of return, but Vladimir llyich Ulyanov had gone home on German hopes and seized power. Russia would be remade according to a heretical Marxism, in Reilly's view. Lenin's combination of revisionist ideology and good fortune was intolerable to Reilly; it wounded his craftsman's ego, which saw chance as a minor player in history. He ignored the evidence of Lenin's organizational skills, by which a spontaneous revolution had been shaped into one with purpose.

Reilly viewed himself and his hopes for Russia with romantic agony and a sense of personal responsibility that were at odds with his practical intellect and shrewdness, both of which should have told him that he could not succeed. But Reilly's cleverness delighted in craft and planning. His actions against the Germans and Japanese were all but inconceivable to the common man. Even military strategists doubted that one man could have carried out Reilly's decisive schemes. His greatest joy was in doing what others believed to be impossible.

Another clue to Reilly's personality lay in his love of technology, especially naval aviation. He was an accomplished flyer who looked to the future of transport. He was fascinated, for example, by the Michelson-Morley experiment to detect the aether wind, which was predicted on the basis of the idea of the earth's motion through a stationary medium. When this detection failed, Reilly worte a letter to a scientific journal (supplied to me by one of my intellectual operatives in London) insisting that the aether was too subtle a substance to register on current instruments. One day, he claimed, aether shins would move between the worlds.

Reilly's mind worried a problem until he found an imaginative solution; then his practical bent would find a way to accomplish the task. As a child he was able to remain invisible to his family simply by staying one step ahead of their house search for him. As a spy he once eluded his pursuers by joining them in the search for him. However rigorous and distasteful the means might be, Reilly would see what was possible and not flinch. With Lenin he understood that a single mind could change the world with thought and daring; but unlike Vladimir Ilyich, Reilly's mind lacked the direction of historical truth. He was capable of bringing into being new

things, but they were only short-lived sports, chimeras of an exceptional but misguided will. His self-imposed exile from his homeland had left divisions as incongruous as his Irish pseudonym.

Sidney Reilly sought escape from the triviality of his life, in which his skills had been used to prop up imperialism. He had been paid in money and women. By the time he returned to Russia, I already sensed that he would be useful to me. It seemed possible, on the basis of his revolutionary leanings, that I might win him to our cause.

2

"Comrade Stalin," Vladimir Ilyich said to me one gloomy summer morning, "tell me who is plotting against us this week." He was sitting in the middle of a large red sofa, under a bare spot on the wall where a Czarist portrait had hung. He seemed very small as he sank into the dusty cushions.

"Only the ones I told you about last week. Not one of them is practical enough to succeed."

He stared at me for a moment, as if disbelieving, but I knew he was only tired. In a moment he closed his eyes and was dozing. I wondered if his bourgeois conscience would balk at the measures he would soon have to take to keep power. It seemed to me that he had put me on the Bolshevik Central Committee to do the things for which he had no stomach. Too many opportunists were ready to step into our shoes if we stumbled. Telling foe from ally was impossible; given the chance, anyone might turn on us.

Reilly was already in Moscow. I learned later that he had come by the usual northern route and had taken a cheap hotel room. On the following morning, he had abandoned that room, leaving behind an old suitcase with some work clothes in it. He had gone to a safe house, where he met a woman of middle vears who knew how to use a handrun.

She was not an imposing figure — an impression she knew how to create; but there was no doubt in Reilly's mind that she would pull the trigger with no care for what happened to her afterward.

Lenin's death was crucial to Reilly's plot, even though he knew that it might make Vladimir Ilyich a Bolshevik martyr. Reilly was also depending on our other weaknesses to work for him. While Thotsky was feverishly organizing the Red Army, we were dependent on small forces — our original Red Guard, made up of factory workers and sailors, a few thousand Chinese railway workers, and the Latvian regiments, who acted as our Praetorian Guard. The Red Guard was loyal but militarily incompetent. The Chinese served in return for food. The Latvians hated the Germans for overrunning their country, but had to be paid. Reilly knew that he could bribe the Latvians and Chinese to turn against us, making it possible for the Cazist officers in hiding to unite and finish the job. With Lenin and myself either

arrested or dead, he could then turn south and isolate Trotsky, who had taken Odessa back from the European allies and was busy shipping in supplies by sea. His position there would become impossible if the British brought in warships. If we failed in the north, we would be vulnerable from two sides.

Lenin's death would alter expectations in everyone. Reilly's cohorts would seize vital centers throughout Moscow. Our Czarist officers would go over to Reilly, taking their men with them. The opportunists among us would desert. Reilly's leaflets had already planted doubts in them. Lenin's death would be their weather vane. Even the martyrdom of Vladimir Ilyich, I realized, might not be enough to help us.

As I gazed at Lenin's sleeping face, I imagined him already dead and forgotten. His wife, Nadezhda, came into the room and covered him with a blanker. She did not look at where I sat behind the large library desk as she left.

i

"Comrade Lenin has been shot!" the messenger cried as he burst into the conference room.

I looked up from the table. "Is he dead?"

The young cadet was flushed from the cold. His teeth chattered as he shook his head in denial, "No — the doctors have him."

"Where?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You're to come with me, Comrade Stalin, for your own safety."

"What else do you know?" I demanded.

"Several of our units, including Cheka, are not responding to orders."

"They've gone over," I said, glancing down at the lists of names I had been studying.

The cadet was silent as I got up and went to the window. The gray courtyard below was deserted. There was no sign of the Latvian guards, and the dead horse I had seen earlier was gone. I turned my head slightly and saw the cadet in the window glass. He was fumbling with his pistol holster. I reached under my long coat and grasped the revolver in my shoulder harness, then turned and pointed it at him under my coat. He had not drawn his pistol.

"No, Comrade Stalin!" he cried, "I was only unsnapping the case. It sticks."

ticks."

I looked into his eyes. He was only a boy, and his fear was convincing.

"We must leave here immediately, Comrade Stalin," he added quickly. "We may be arrested at any moment."

I slipped my gun back into its sheath. "Lead the way."

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"We'll go out the back," he said, his voice shaking with relief.

"Did it happen at the factory?" I asked.

"Just as he finished his speech, a woman shot at him," he replied. I tried to imagine what Reilly was doing at this very moment.

The cadet led me down the back stairs of the old office block. The iron railing was rusting, and the stairwell smelled of urine. On the first landing the cadet turned around and found his courage.

"You are under arrest, Comrade Stalin," he said with a nervous smile.

My boot caught him under the chin. I felt his neck break as he fired the pistol into the railing, scattering rust into my face. He fell backward onto the landing. I hurried down and wrenched the gun from his stiffening fingers, then went back up to the office.

There was a hiding place behind the toilet, but I would use it only if I had to. I came into the room and paused, listening, but there was only the sound of wind rattling the windows. Was it possible that they had sent only one person for me? Something had gone wrong, or the cadet had come for me on his own initiative, hoping to ingratiate himself with the other side. All of which meant I could expect another visit at any moment.

I hurried down the front stairs to the lobby, went out cautiously through the main doors, and spotted a motorcycle nearby — probably the cadet's. I rushed to it, got on, and started it on the first kick. I gripped the handlebars, gunned the engine into a roar, then turned the bike around with a screech and rolled into the street, expecting to see them coming for me.

But there was no one on the street. Something had gone wrong. The Latvians had been removed to leave me exposed, but the next step, my arrest and execution, had somehow been delayed. Only the cadet had showed up.

I tried to think. Where would they have taken Vladimir Ilyich? It had to be the old safe house outside of Moscow, just south of the city. That would be the only place now. I wondered if I had enough petrol to reach it.

4

Lenin was at the country house. He was not mortally wounded. His assassin was there also, having been taken prisoner by the Cheka guards who had gone with Lenin to the factory.

"Comrade Stalin!" Vladimir Ilyich exclaimed as I sat down by his cot in

the book-lined study. "You are safe, but our situation is desperate."

"What has happened?" I asked, still unsteady from the long motorcycle ride.

"Moscow has fallen. Our Latvian regiments have deserted, along with our Chinese workers. Most of the Red Guards have been imprisoned. The Social Revolutionaries have joined the counterrevolution. My assassin is one of them. I suspect that killing me was to have been their token of good

faith. There's no word from Trotsky's southern volunteers. There doesn't seem to be much we can do. We might even have to flee the country."

"Never," I replied.

He raised his hand to his massive forehead.

"Don't shout, I'm in terrible pain. The bullet was in my shoulder, but I have a headache that won't stop,"

I looked around for Nadezhda, but she was not in the room, I saw several haggard, unfamiliar faces and realized that no one of great importance had escaped with Lenin from Moscow. By now they were in Reilly's hands, dead or about to be executed. He would not wait long. I had underestimated the Bastard of Odessa.

"What shall we do?" I asked.

Vladimir Ilvich sighed and closed his eyes. "I would like your suggestions."

"We must go where they won't find us easily," I replied, "I know several places in Georgia."

His eyes opened and fixed on me. "As long as you don't want to return to robbing banks."

His words irritated me, but I didn't show it.

"We needed the money," I said calmly, remembering that he had once described me as crude and vulgar. Living among émigré Russians in Europe had affected his practical sense.

"Of course, of course," he replied with a feeble wave of his hand. "You are a dedicated and useful man."

There was a muffled shot from outside. It seemed to relax Vladimir Ilvich, Dora Kaplan, his assassin, had been executed.

Just before leaving the safe house, we learned that Lenin's wife had been executed. Vladimir Ilvich began to rave as we led him out to the truck, insisting to me that Reilly could not have killed Nadezhda, and that the report had to be false. I said nothing; to me her death had been inevitable. As Lenin's lifelong partner, and a theoretician herself, she would have posed a threat in his absence. Reilly's swiftness in removing her impressed me. Lenin's reaction to her death was unworthy of a Bolshevik; suddenly his wife was only an unimportant woman. Nadezhda Krupskaya had not been an innocent.

We fled south, heading for a railway station that was still in our hands, just south of Moscow, where a special train was waiting to take us to Odessa. If the situation in that city turned out to be intractable, we would attempt to reach a hiding place in my native Georgia.

Three Chekas came with us in the truck - a young lieutenant and two pri-

vates, both of whom had abandoned the Czar's forces for the revolution. I watched the boyish faces of the two privates from time to time, looking for signs of doubt. The lieutenant, who was also a mechanic, drove the old Ford, nursing the truck through the muddy ten kilometers to the station.

"He could have held her hostage," Vladimir Ilyich insisted to me as the truck sputtered and coughed along. "Don't you think so? Maybe he thought we were dead, and she would be of no use to him as a hostage?"

For the next hour he asked his own questions and gave his own impossible answers. It depressed me to hear how much of the bourgeois there was still in him. I felt the confusion in the minds of the two Chekas.

It began to rain as the sun went down. We couldn't see the road ahead. The lieutenant pulled over and waited. Water seeped in on us through the musty canvas. Vladimir Ilyich began to weep.

"She was a soldier in our cause," I said loudly, hating his sentimentality. He stared out into the rainy twilight. Lightning flashed as he turned to look at me, and for a moment it seemed that his face had turned to marble. "You're right?" he said, eyes wild with conviction. "I must remember that?"

Of course, I had always disliked Nadezhda's hovering, familiar-like ways. She had been a bony raven at his shoulder, forever whispering asides, but I had always taken great care to be polite to her. Now more than ever I realized what a buttress she had been to Vladimir Ilvich.

The rain lessened. The lieutenant tried to start the Ford, but it was dead. "There's not much time," I said. "How much farther?"

"Less than half a kilometer."

"We'll go on foot," I said. "There's no telling who may be behind us."

I helped Vladimir Ilyich down from the truck. He managed to stand alone
and refused my arm as we began to march on the muddy road. He moved
steadily at my side, but his breathing was labored.

We were within sight of the station when he collapsed.

"Help!" I called out.

The lieutenant and one of the privates came back, lifted Vladimir Ilyich onto their shoulders, and hurried ahead with him. It was like a scene from the street rallies, but without the crowds.

"Is he very ill?" the other private asked me as I caught up.

I did not answer. Ahead, the train waited in a conflagration of storm lamps and steam.

6

Our train consisted of a dining car, a kitchen, one supply car, and the engine. A military evacuation train was being readled on the track next to ours, to carry away those who would be fleeing out of Moscow in the next day or two. I was surprised at this bit of organization. When I asked how it had

been accomplished, a sergeant said one word to me: "Trotsky."

We sped off into the warm, misty night. Vladimir Ilyich recovered enough to have dinner with me and our three soldiers. The plush luxury of the Czarisi interior seemed to brighten his mood.

"I only hope that Trotsky is in Odessa when we arrive," he said, sipping his brandy, "and that he can raise a force we can work with. Our foreign venders have been paid, fortunately, but we will have to keep our southern port open to be supplied."

He was looking into the large mirror at our right as he spoke. I nodded to his reflection.

"The troops behind us," the youthful lieutenant added, "will help insure that."

Vladimir Ilyich put down his glass and looked at me directly. "Do you think, Comrade Stalin, that we hoped for too much?" He sounded lost.

"No," I answered. "We have popular support. The people are waiting to hear from you. Reilly's pamphlets have struck a nerve of longing with promises of foreign help and bourgeois progress, but he is actually depending only on the uncertainty of our followers. His mercenaries won't count for much when the news that you are alive gets out. Most of his support can be taken from him with that alone, but we will have to follow our victory with a period of terror, to compel loyalty among the doubters."

He nodded to me, then looked into the darkness of the window. In that mirror we rode not only in a well-appointed, brightly lit dining room, but in the cave of all Russia.

"You must get some sleep," I said.

We found blankets and made ourselves comfortable on the leather couches. The lieutenant turned down the lights.

couches. The lieutenant turned down the lights.

I tried to sleep, but my thoughts seemed to organize themselves to the clatter of the train wheels. Contempt for my own kind crept into me, especially for the idealists in our Party. Too many utopian fools were setting themselves up against their own nature and what was possible. They did not grasp that progress was like the exponent in one of Einstein's fashionable equations—a small modifying quantity that has an effect only when the big term grew very large. They failed to see that only when the biggest letter of human history, material wealth, became sufficiently large, would there be a chance for social progress. Only then would we be able to afford to become humane. My role in this revolution was to remember this fact, and to act when it was neelected. . . .

7

Our mood was apprehensive as our train pulled into Odessa. We stepped out into bright sunlight, and a deserted station.

"We don't know what may have happened here," I said.

"There hasn't been time," Vladimir Îlyich replied. His voice was gruff after three days on the train, and he seemed ready to bark at me in his usual way. I felt reassured. This was the Lenin who had taken a spontaneous uprising and interpreted the yearning of the masses so they would know what to do; the Lenin who would make ours a Communist revolution despite Marx. Like Reilly, Lenin was irreplaceable. Without him there would only be a struggle for power, with no vision justifying action.

Suddenly, a Ford Model T sedan pulled into the station and rattled toward us down the platform. I took Lenin's arm, ready to shove him out of

harm's way, but the car slowed and stopped.

"Welcome!" the driver shouted as he threw open the door and got out. When he opened the back door for us, I saw that he was Trotsky's youngest son, Sergei. I greeted him and smiled, but his eyes worshiped only Lenin as we got into the back sear, as if I didn't exist.

Sergei drove quickly, but the ride was comfortable. With the windows closed, Odessa seemed distant. We climbed a hill and saw the sun glistening on the Black Sea. I remembered the smell of leather in my father's shoe shop. Warm days gave the shop a keener odor. I pictured myself in the small church library, which was open to sons who might one day be priests. The books had been dusty, the air full of waxy smells from the lamps and candles. I remembered the young girl I had seduced on a sunny afternoon, and for an instant the world's failings seemed far away. I began to wonder if we were driving into a betrayal.

A crowd surrounded us as we pulled into the center of the city. They

peered inside, saw Lenin, and cheered.

Trotsky was waiting for us with a company of soldiers on the courthouse steps. We climbed out into a bright paradise of good feeling. Trotsky saluted us, then came down and embraced Vladimir Ilyich, who looked shabby in his brown waistcoat under that silky blue sky.

The crowd cheered them. As Lenin turned to address the throng, I felt Reilly plotting against us in Moscow, and I knew in that moment what it

would take to stop him.

"Comrades!" Lenin cried, regaining his old self with one word. "A dangerous counterrevolution has seized Moscow! It is supported by the foreign allies, who are not content with defeating Germany. They also want our lands. But we will regroup here, and strike north. With Comrade Trotsky's Red Army, and your bravery, we shall prevail. . . "

As he spoke, I wondered if anyone in Moscow would believe that he was still alive, short of seeing him there. Open military actions would not defeat Reilly in any reasonable time. It would take years, while the revolution withered, especially if Reilly avoided decisive battles. Reilly had to be killed as quickly and as publicly as possible. Like Lenin he was a leader who needed him. There was no arguing

with this fact of human attachment. Without Reilly, the counterrevolution would collapse in a matter of days. His foreign supporters would not easily shift their faith to another figure.

He had to die in a week, two at the latest, and I knew how it would have to be done. There was no other way.

"Long live Comrade Lenin!" the crowd chanted — loudly enough, it seemed to me, for Reilly to hear it in his bed in Moscow.

8

From the reports I had read about Reilly's life and activities, I suspected that he was a man who liked to brood. It was a way of searching, of pointing himself toward his hopes. He prayed to himself, beseching a hidden center, where the future sang of sweet possibilities.

As head of his government, he would have to act against both Czarists and Bolsheviks. He could count on Czarists joining his regime, but he would never trust a Bolshevik. Czarists would be fairly predictable in their military actions, but Bolsheviks, he knew, would spare no outrage to bring him down.

He was probably in what remained of the British Embassy in Moscow, sipping brandy in the master bedroom, perhaps playing with the idea the might have joined us. I knew there had been efforts to recruit him for our intelligence service. He would have disappeared and reemerged as another man, as he did when he left Odessa for South America in his youth, to escape his adulterous family's bourgeois pesthole. It would have been simple justice for him to return in the same way, even as a Bolshevik.

But for the moment, Russia was his to mold. I could almost hear the Jew congratulating himself in that great bed of English oak.

Within the week there would be a knock on his bedroom door, and a messenger would bring him word that Lenin was in Odessa. Reilly would sit up and lean uncomfortably against the large wooden headboard, where once there had been luxurious pillows (a pity that the mobs had torn them to pieces). He would read the message with a rush of excitement and realize that a British seaplane could get him to Odessa within a day. The entire mission would flash through his mind, as if he were remembering the future.

He would fly to the Black Sea, then swing north to Odessa, using the night for cover. What feelings would pass through him as he landed on the moonlit water? Here he was, returning to the city of his childhood in order to test himself against his greatest enemies. The years would run back in his mind as he sat in the open doorway of the amphibious aircraft, breathing in the night air and remembering the youth who had startled himself with his superiority to the people around him. He had blackmailed his mother's lover for the money to escape Odessa. The man had nearly choked when

he'd called him father.

He would know that he was risking his counterrevolution by coming here alone. The Bolsheviks would be able to pull down any of his possible successors. But it was the very implausibility of his coming here alone that would protect him, he would tell himself. Tarnishing Lenin's name by revealing Germany's hand in his return was not enough. Lenin had to die before his followers could regroup, before reports of his death were proven false. Only then would the counterrevolution be able to rally the support of disenchanted Czarists, moderate democrats, churchmen, and Mensheviks - all those who still hoped for a regime that would replace monarchy but avoid Bolshevism.

Reilly was a hopeless bourgeois, but more intelligent than most, hence more dangerous, despite his romantic imagination. He sincerely believed that Bolshevism would only gain Russia the world's animosity and insure our country's cultural and economic poverty.

He would come into Odessa one morning, in a small boat, perhaps dressed as a fisherman. He would savor the irony of his return to the city of his youth, wearing old clothes, following the pattern of all his solo missions. It was a form of rebirth. He trusted it, and so would I.

The warmer climate of Odessa speeded Lenin's physical recovery. He would get up with the sun and walk along the street that led to the Great Steps (the site of the 1905 massacre of the townspeople by Czarist Cossacks, which the expatriot homosexual director, Sergei Eisenstein, later filmed in Hollywood). I let the Cheka guards sleep late and kept an eye on Vladimir Ilvich myself.

One morning, as I watched him through field glasses from the terrace of our hotel, he stopped and gazed out over city and sea, then sat down on the first step, something he had not done before. His shoulders slumped in defeat. He was probably reminiscing about his bourgeois European life with Krupskaya and regretting their return to Russia. His euphoric recovery during the first week after our arrival had eroded, and he had slowly slipped back into a brooding silence.

As I watched, a man's head floated up from the steps below the seated Lenin. The figure of a fisherman came into view, stopped next to Vladimir Ilvich, and tipped his hat to him. I turned my glasses to the sea and searched. Yes! There was something on the horizon - a small boat, or the wings of a seaplane. The reports I had received of engine sounds in the early morning had been correct.

I whipped back to the two figures. They were conversing amiably. Vladimir Ilyich seemed pleased by the encounter, but then he had always 59 shown a naive faith in simple folk, and sometimes spoke to them as if he were confessing. Krupskava's death had made him unobservant, and Reilly was a superb actor.

Reilly was taking his time out of sheer vanity, it seemed to me. He would

not kill his great rival without first talking to him.

I put down the field glasses, checked my revolver, then slipped it into my shoulder holster and hurried downstairs, wearing only my white shirt and trousers. I ran through the deserted streets, sweating in the warm morning air, expecting at any moment to hear a shot. I reached the row of houses just above the Great Steps, slipped into a doorway, then crept out.

The blood was pounding in my ears as I peered around the corner. Lenin and the fisherman were sitting on the top step with their back to me. Vladimir Ilyich was gesturing with his right hand. I could almost hear him.

The words sounded familiar.

I waited, thinking that the man was a fisherman, and that I had expected too much of Reilly.

Then the stranger put his arm around Vladimir Ilvich's shoulders. What had they been saving to each other? Had they reached some kind of rapprochement? Perhaps Lenin was in fact a German agent, and these two had been working together all along. Could I have been so wrong? The sight of them sitting side by side like old friends unnerved me.

The fisherman gripped Lenin's head with both hands and twisted it. The neck snapped, and in that long moment it seemed to me that he would tear the head from the body. I drew my revolver and rushed forward.

"Did you think it would be that easy, Rosenblum?" I said as I came up be-

hind him.

The fisherman turned and looked up at me, not with surprise, but with irritation, and let go of Lenin. "Don't move," I said as the corpse slumped face down across the stairs.

The fisherman seemed to relax, but he was watching me carefully. "So you used him as bait," he said, gesturing at the body. "Why didn't you just kill him yourself?"

His question was meant to annoy me.

He looked out to sea. "Yes, an economical solution to counterrevolution. You liquidate us both while preserving the appearance of innocence. You're certain that Moscow will fall without me."

I did not reply.

He squinted up at me. "Are you sure it's me you've captured? I may have sent someone else." He laughed.

I gestured with my revolver. "The seaplane - only Sidney Reilly would have come here in one. You had to come quickly."

He nodded to himself, as if admitting his sins. "What did Vladimir Ilyich say to you?" I asked.

His mood changed, as if I had suddenly given him what he needed.

"Well?" I demanded.

"You're very curious about that," he said without looking at me. "I may not tell you."

"Suit yourself."

He considered for a moment. "I will tell you. He feared for Russia's future, and that moved me, Comrade Stalin. He was afraid because there are too many of the likes of you. I was surprised to hear it from him."

"The likes of me?"

"Yes, the cynics and doubters who won't be content until they've made the world as barren for everyone else as they've made it for themselves. His wife's death brought it all home to him, as nothing else could have. His words touched me."

"Did you tell him that you killed her?"

"I was too late to save her."

"And he believed you?"

"Yes. I told him who I was. His dreams were dead. He wanted to die."
My hand was sweaty on the revolver. "Bourgeois sentiments destroyed
him. I hope you two enjoyed exchanging idealist bouquets. Did you tell him
what you would have done if you had caught us in Moscow?"

He looked up and smiled at me. "I would have paraded all of you through the street without your pants and underwear, shirttails flapping in the https://

"And then killed us."

"No, I wouldn't have made martyrs. Prison would have served well enough after such ridicule."

"But you came here to kill him."

"Perhaps not," he said with a sigh. "I might have taken him back as my prisoner, but he wanted to die. I killed him as I would have an injured dog. In any case, Moscow believes that he died weeks ago."

"Well, you've botched it all now, haven't you?"
"At least I know that Lenin died a true Bolshevik."

"So now you claim to understand Bolshevism?"

"I always have. True Bolshevism contains enough constructive ideas to make possible a high social justice. It shares that with Christianity and the French Revolution, but it's the likes of you, Comrade Stalin, who will prevent a proper wedding of ideals and practical government." He smided: "Well, perhaps the marriage will take place despite you. The little Soviets may hold fast to their democratic structures and bring you down in time. Who knows, they may one day lead the world to the highest ideal of statesmanship—internationalism."

"Fine words," I said, tightening my grip on the revolver, "but the reality is that you've done our Soviet cause a great service — by being a foreign agent, a counterrevolutionary, a Jewish bastard, and Lenin's assassin, all in

one."

"I've only done you a service," he said bitterly, and I felt his hatred and frustration.

"You simply don't understand the realities of power, Rosenblum."
"Do tell," he said with derision.

"Only limited things are possible with humanity," I replied. "The mad dog within the great mass of people must be kept muzzled. Civil order is the best any society can hope to achieve."

The morning sun was hot on my face. As I reached up to wipe my forehead with my sleeve, Reilly leaped over Lenin's body and fled down the long stairs.

I aimed and fired, but my fingers had stiffened during our little dialogue.

My bullet got off late and missed. I fired again as he jumped a dozen steps, but the bullet hit well behind him.

"Stop him!" I shouted to a group of people below him. They had just come out of the church at the foot of the stairs. "He's killed Comrade Lenin!"

Reilly saw that he couldn't get by them. He turned and started back toward me, drawing a knife as he went. He stopped and threw it, but it struck the steps to my right. I laughed, and he came for me with his bare hands. I aimed, knowing that he might reach me if I missed. It impressed me that he would gamble on my aim rather than risk the drop over the great railings.

I pulled the trigger. The hammer struck a defective cartridge. Reilly grunted as he sensed victory, and kept coming.

I fired again.

The bullet pierced his throat. He staggered up and fell bleeding at my feet, one hand clawing at my heavy boots. His desperation was both strange and unexpected. Nothing had ever failed for him in quite this way. Its simplicity affronted his intelligence.

"I also feel for dogs," I said, squeezing a round into the back of his head. He lay still, free of life's metaphysics.

I holstered my revolver and nudged his body forward. It sprawled next to Lenin, then rolled down to the next landing. The people from the church

came up, paused around Vladimir Ilyich, then looked up to me.
"Vladimir Ilyich's assassin is dead!" I shouted. "The counterrevolution

has failed." A breeze blew in from the sea and cooled my face. I breathed deeply and looked saddened.

Reilly was hung up by his neck in his hometown, but I was the only one who knew enough to appreciate the irony. Fisherman sailed out and towed his seaplane to shore.

Lenin's body was placed in a tent set up in the harbor area, where all Odessans could come to pay their last respects. Trotsky and I stood in line with everyone else. One of our warships fired its guns in a final salute.

We sent the news to Moscow in two carefully timed salvos.

First, that Reilly, a British agent, had been killed during an attempt on Lenin's life; then, that our beloved Vladimir Ilyich had succumbed to wounds received, after a valiant struggle.

We went north with our troops, carrying Lenin's coffin, recruiting all the way. Everywhere people met our train with shouts of allegiance. Trotsky appointed officers, gathered arms, and kept records. He also scribbled in his diarv like a schooleirl.

I knew now that I was Lenin's true heir, truer than he had been to himself in his last weeks. I would hold fast to that and to Russia, especially when Trotsky began to lecture me again about the urgent need for world revolution.

In the years that followed, I searched for men like Reilly to direct our espionage and intelligence services. If he had been turned, our KGB would have been built on a firmer foundation of skills and techniques. He would have recruited English agents for us with ease, especially from their universities, where the British played at revolution and ideology, and sentimentalized justice. I could not rid myself of the feeling that in time Rosenblum would have turned back to his mother country; he had never been, after all, a Czarist. I regretted having had to kill him on that sunny morning in Odessa, because in later years I found myself measuring so many men against him. I wondered if a defective cartridge or a jammed revolver could have changed the outcome. Probably not. I would have been forced to club him to death. Still, he might have disarmed me. . . .

But on that train in 1918, on the snowy track to Moscow, I could only wonder at Reilly's naive belief that he could have altered the course of Soviet inevitability, which now so clearly belonged to me.

A CASE OF SHELLSHOCK

A romantic young Earthman named Nathan Would love to have had a relation With a Pollux-3 belle But she staved in her shell

Like a morally proper crustacean.

- Mike Curry





In 1988, Martha Soukup was a John W. Campbell Award nominee. She was also a member of the SFWA Nebula Award jury, which means that she'll always be one of the experts on the science fiction published in 1988.

"Over the Long Hau!" is her second story sale to Amazing" Stories (her first was "Dreams of Sawn Ivory," May 1989). "The idea of remote-driven trucks was Algis Budrys's;" she informs us, "but the characters, society, and plot are all mine?" And we add that this is a quite telling tale about the future of the welfare program.

Sometimes I think I've been in this truck forever, but of course that's not so. I just have to look at my license card if I want the proof: "Shawana Mooney," it says, and right next to that the day I got the card, two years ago. Two weeks after little Cilehe was born, which makes it easy to remember her birthday.

That name "Shawna" makes me think sometimes my daddy was a guy named Shawn Parker. My mama sure cried when he got shot dead when I was eight, but she wouldn't say he was my daddy. She just said he was no good and ran drugs and then she cried some more. Mooney, of course, that's my mama's name and her mama's, and it was my great-grandma's too. Also my great-grandpa's. They were married.

Then the card's got my picture, which looks terrible with my eyes all stary the way the camera caught them, but I kind of like the way I had my hair

done then, with all those little braids my grandma put in.

I must look awful now. Hook at myself in the big side mirror when I fix up my makeup, but I don't really look hard at the whole effect, if you know what I mean. When Tomi gets a little bigger — he's barely four now — maybe I can teach him to fix my hair.

Or maybe we'll get out of this truck.

I think about that a lot, especially when Cilehe gets cranky and yells. Which isn't fair to her of course because what two-year-old wants to grow up in the cab of a truck, six feet wide and six feet deep? Sure, she's got "Sesame Street" like I did—and a lot of other much more boring TV, like it or not—but I could go outside besides, even if my grandma was always warning me about gangs. Cilehe's the kind of baby who needs to move around and tire herself out, which is pretty hard here.

I know exactly how she feels.

But it's none of her doing. I tell myself that. I got her by my own self—well, I had help, but it isn't her fault her daddy isn't in a truck too. They put the welfare parents who actually are raising the kids in the trucks. Now, do you know any guy who's going to take them? Nope. Both their daddies were long gone before that happened.

One truck stop looks a lot like another. I was kind of dozing behind the wheel when it took a big pull right and the truck went off to an exit. I tried to guess where we were — I thought maybe Nebraska. Sure was flat as hell out there.

Cilehe started kicking up a fit. She always acts like the last couple minutes before we stop is a couple of hours, and screaming will make the truck go faster. The only thing that could make the truck go faster is if I hit MANUAL OVERRIDE and drove it myself, and I'd better have a damn good reason for that or it's big trouble. She was screaming for the porty. She just started with that, and she doesn't like the portapotty in the cab. Me neither I don't care what they say, the thing smells.

Got her in before she messed up her panties, Tomi following quiet as a mouse. He's not quite big enough to send into the boy's room alone yet. Then she didn't want to wash her hands, and when I made her, she got her hands and face and hair and T-shirt and the floor all wet, and glared up at me like I did it. She stomped out of the bathroom with her sneakers going

squish, squish, squish.

I looked in to see if I knew any of the drivers. Kimberlea and Avis were both there, still going along the same route I was. I met Avis for the first time in Minneapolis on this run. Kimberlea I met soon after I started. The women on the road tell me you can go forever between seeing someone twice, so that was lucky. As long as we kept going along the same route, taking our full breaks — who wouldn't take her full break? — so they'd be the same length, we'd keep meeting up. Kimberlea is older than my mama, maybe forty, and she used to do keypunching in the very last office that still used it, years and years after everyone else stopped, until the business was sold and they retired the old-time system. Her kids are twelve and eight, and she was even married when she had them.

Avis was having trouble with her boy. Her one-year-old twins were in the big playpen in the middle of the dining room, the boy screaming his head off. I looked at Cilehe, but she just stared at the kid with big round eyes, didn't copy him. The baby wailed, while Avis drank Coke with her face turned away from him, her eyebrows down and her mouth real tight, trying

to act like the baby wasn't there.

"But I don't know if I want green or blue," she was saying to Kimberlea. Kimberlea sighed. "Girl, what do you need with neon fingernails?" I put Cilehe in the pen, away from Avis's boy, and let Tomi sit next to me.

"Just because I'm stuck in a truck all day doesn't mean I can't look good!"

Avis is a couple years younger than me, maybe seventeen.

"That sort of thing costs money. You don't get that much to save."

"So what else do I have to spend it on?"

"You can save it," Kimberlea said stubbornly.

"Right, and maybe in twelve years when my babies are teenagers and they let me out. I'll have a couple hundred bucks!" Avis took a long drink of her

Coke. Kimberlea and I said hi. "So why not order the implant kit and have something now?"

"Couple hundred dollars is better than nothing. And you could save more than that"

"On what the government gives us?" Avis snorted and peeled open a Snickers. "I save six dollars a week," Kimberlea said.

"You told us," Avis said.

Last stop, Kimberlea'd laid out her whole plan over breakfast. She's studying for her accounting license. Accounting's just a matter of using spreadsheets and stuff, she said, but they still make you study for it. The course work costs, and then you have to get a license, which is a lot of money even before the bribes. She saves every penny, Doesn't even use up her food vouchers; sells the leftovers back to the government for half-value, or sometimes to other truckers for two-thirds. Her plate had scraps of meat loaf and carrots. Not even Jello for desert. She stays husky just the same.

"What the fuck you want an accounting license for anyway?" Avis asked. "It's just minimum wage. Your oldest is thirteen next year, so you get out one way or another." Trucking's also a labor option for mothers with just one pre-teenager, but I've only seen a couple women who chose it when they didn't have to. They'd put her on some other workfare labor. Maybe sidewalk cleaning. That's what I did, five hours a day, before Cilehe. I used to hate it, but it's better than trucking.

Kimberlea took her paper napkin off her lap, folded it neatly, and laid it on her tray. "I don't like being on welfare if I can work," she said. "Not this workfare joke - a real job. I always worked until they took my job away. That's the way I know."

The boy was screaming so loud now even Avis couldn't ignore it any longer. "Shit," she said. She stuffed the rest of the Snickers into her mouth

and went to get him.

Kimberlea and I talked for a couple minutes until her watch started beeping. "Back to the road," she said. She gathered up her two kids, who had been reading quietly at another table - don't know how she saves six bucks a week, if she buys them books - and left.

Avis came back, "Damn kid needed a new diaper," she said, "Where's old Kim Burly?"

"Her break was up."

"Stuck-up bitch." She wiggled her fingers in my face. "So do you think green or blue?"

Tomi tugged my arm and pointed. I was set to ignore him, but the room had gone quiet. I looked up.

There was a man in the dining room.

Maybe if you don't truck, you don't know how strange that was. When I was little, I guess most truckers were guys. Then they came up with the remote-driving system, one guy in his living room controlling a dozen trucks. The unions kicked a fuss about that, of course, so everyone yelled at each other until they came up with a couple solutions: early retirement with heaps of compensation for the old truckers — lot of younger guys took that and went into other work — and retraining the truckers that passed the tests to be controllers at a big fat salary. At the same time, they passed a law that there had to be a driver in each truck. For manual override in emergencies, like that was going to happen. But nobody trusts computers and leastways unions.

Then came the Welfare Labor Act, the workfare act.

Bound to happen, they put us in the trucks. It's boring. It doesn't pay shit—the controllers get the real money. We all know why they put us with two kids in the trucks. It's like, you get yourself one kid, they put you cleaning sidewalks or something and thinking on what happens if you get another one. You get another one. You get another one anyway, and bam! into a truck. So now you're on the road all the time, only get out at a truck stop and see other drivers and they're all women too. A third kid is too many to live in a truck cab, so you'd get out, but how're you going to get a third one? Locking you in a convent couldn't work any better.

What they say is truck cabs are perfect classrooms, educational TV the kids (and their moms) can't get away from. Getting away from bad influ-

ences. Breaking the cycle of poverty.

What it's about is punishing us, keeping us away from that nasty stuff that got us here. We all know it. These are the same people who got abortion made illegal, and whittled down sex ed next to nothing. (Though from what my mama told me once before she moved on, people hardly used birth control even when they had teachers telling them about it.) They're punishing us, all right.

I never saw a guy trucking. As far as I ever knew, they didn't even *let* guys choose trucking.

Avis was staring. "Jesus, it's a man!" she whispered.

"Real good," I said. "You remember what they look like."

Maybe I hadn't, though. Oh, he was tall and he was fine. White, like Clehe's daddy, but dark tan skin. Maybe Latin. His hair came down in a braid over one shoulder, thick and brown and shiny. Cheekbones cut high like a TV Indian's. He had tight old jeans on. The way they hugged his hips close you could imagine doing yourself.

Man, it had been too long since I'd seen a guy.

He walked over to an empty table across the room and a dozen pairs of eyes followed him. Nobody said a word.

One skinny girl with a baby on her hip went over and stared down at him. "Truckers only in this room," she said in a mean voice.

That broke the silence. Everyone started up with catcalls, hisses, and "Who cares?" The girl glared back at all of us. Some of them, when they get

put in the trucks, actually buy the crap about our Evil Ways and get worse than any taxpayer.

The guy just smiled up at her so nice your toes curled. "You're right," he said. His voice was like caramel candy. He pulled out his trucker's card.

The girl's lips went white. She grabbed the kid up in her arm, pulled another off her chair, and left the room.

"This is mine," Avis said, to me or maybe just to the universe.

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes looked like a cat's fixing to go after a mouse. Squintier than a cat's, though, in her pasty pimply face. No way a man so fine-looking would go for her.

Not that I was after him.

"Seventeen months," Avis said. No need to ask seventeen months since what.

I fluffed my hair up around my forehead. I knew it looked like hell.

Avis was already moving, plowing through a crowd of women all trying to look like they had some casual reason for happening to go over by that par-

ticular table at that particular time. It sure wasn't worth it to join the mob. "Look after your sister," I told Tomi. I put him in the pen with the other

kids. "I'll be back in five minutes. Need some fresh air." "Me too, Mama?" he asked, but he's a good kid. He didn't complain. I

didn't want fresh air, I wanted to get out of the room so my eyes wouldn't be all over that guy. Something got you in this fix, I told myself. You think you'd learn someday.

Even the place outside for truckers to walk around is separate from the place car drivers go to let their poodles piddle. Same sky, though, high and gray, the wind whipping around pretty good. I took a deep breath of windy air. I told myself I wasn't a kid anymore, fourteen and stupid like when Tomi's daddy got him on me. When that didn't work, I tried telling myself he had a whole truck stop full of girls to pick from. When that didn't work, I looked at my watch and told myself I only had another ten minutes in my break, and odds were this guy wasn't going the same way anyway.

I talked to myself until I had me just about convinced.

"Nice day," he said.

I didn't jump. I was great. "Sure, if you hate sun and like smog." "Somebody must," he said, "or you wouldn't be outside in it."

I turned then. "Oh, I just get tired of girl talk all the time," I said.

"I wouldn't know," he said. The wind was strong enough to flop his braid around. Some of his hair was loose and blowing over his forehead. His eyes were the clearest lightest brown I'd ever seen. "The women always seem to stop talking when I come in."

"Yeah, well, they're easily impressed." I couldn't understand why he was out here with me. Couldn't understand why I was saving bitchy things to him either.

"But not you, I guess," he said.

"I been around some."

"I can tell you're a woman of experience."

Was he laughing at me? He didn't look like it. I grunted in a worldly sort of way.

"Cal," he said, sticking his hand out. After a moment I realized it was his name. "Shawana," I said. Took his hand. Right when I did, I knew I never

should have. Something about man flesh just feels different, and the skin of my hand, I realized, had been starved for the taste of it. The rest of my skin started up a clamor.

He was still holding on to my hand, so I pulled it back. I tried to think of something regular to say. "Don't see a lot of guys trucking." I said. Oh. smooth, Real smooth. "Well, vou've seen me," he said.

"Don't you have to have kids to get a trucking license?"

"Yes"

I couldn't think of anything to say to that - or too many things: You got kids? How come you have them and not their mamas? Where are they - the mamas and especially the kids? What are you doing out here?

Maybe he read my mind a little, "The baby's in his crib in the truck, I

didn't want to wake him."

"Just one baby?"

Cal nodded - the braid went swish, swish.

"How come you're trucking?" Maybe it was rude to ask, but I could have said, Why isn't his mama stuck with him like the usual course of events? which would've been ruder.

He looked away, which showed off his sharp cheekbones against the gray sky just about perfect. "I needed time to be alone. To think."

"Well, you sure got that," I said. I couldn't not ask any longer. "I didn't

think they let guys truck. I thought it was a mother's job."

He rubbed his face in his hands and the air seemed to get even darker. "She - Jess's mother died. When he was born."

Oh, shit. "Jesus, I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"

He looked back at me and tried to smile. "That's okay. You couldn't know"

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Well, that's the one exception to the guideline that unwed welfare mothers get all the trucks. If the mother's dead, they let the father do it." His mouth quirked with no smile to it. "After all, their big argument is that the truck's the ideal classroom, so they can't say no. It's for the good of the kid, right?"

I felt bad about my nosiness. The silence stretched out.

"Um, you miss her?"

"Well, it's getting better. I don't think she was going to marry me any-

way."

"You were engaged?"

He shook his head. "But I thought I could get her to marry me after -"

He stopped and looked straight up at the sky, blinking hard.

I grabbed his hand, saying some nonsense like I do when Tomi's crying.

Here I'd just been thinking about this guy as a hot body. Then I was holding him and still saying soothing nonsense things.

My watched beeped. He pulled back.

"I gotta be going."

"I'm sorry. Usually I want to be alone, but sometimes it's hard — and in the truck stops there's always such a crowd —"

"It's okay," I said. "I hope things are better.

"Which way are you going?" he asked suddenly.

"How do I know? It's been west on 80, if that's any help. I think I may be going to Salt Lake. I've done that route once or twice."

"Maybe we'll see each other again along the route."
My face got warm. "There's no way to know that."

He smiled an I-know-things-you-don't smile. "I have ways of being more certain."

The watched beeped again. "Well - bye, Cal."

"Until we meet again," he said.

Gilehe was in a real bad mood from being left alone. Tomi was trying to make her laugh, meowing like a cat and rubbing against her feet. Don't know where he ever saw a cat. Maybe on "Sesame Street." My watch was beeping steady now: if I didn't get into the truck in a big hurry, I'd lose all my discretionary money for a week. I helped Tomi out of the pen, yanked Cilehe up by the armpit, and ran to the parking lot.

Cal was leaning against a big black truck like I'd never seen. He looked at us as we scrambled up into the cab. I pushed the button to say we were ready to go. The truck lurched and souealed out of the lot and onto the hierbway.

It was fractions on the TV — one half, one third, one quarter — over and over and over and over again. Tomi watched for a while. Cilche just scowled and rocked back and forth. Usually I pick her up when she gets like that. But as long as she wasn't making noise. I had other things to think on.

Out in the walking area, holding Cal, I was just trying to make him feel better. Now it was over, I was noticing all the ways he felt to me. His thick braid of hair squeezed between our chests. His soft flannel shirt and the hard muscles underneath it. The man smell. The little raspy sound when his tight jeans rubbed on mine —

Another twenty minutes and there's no telling what might have happened.

But the road wore on and the fluttery feeling began to die away. The guy had acted like he had reason to think we'd be at the same truck stop down the road, but that was about as likely as running into a whole different guy would be. If only I'd run into him earlier — nearer the beginning of the hour lunch break. Next break would only be twenty minutes, to gas up the truck and grab a quick bite, and he was running more than twenty minutes behind me on the road even if he did go the same direction and stop at the same stop.

Unless he decided to cut his lunch short and get right back on the road— I began to have another thought I maybe wasn't proud of, a thought about

getting us out of the truck.

We stayed on 80 like I'd guessed, which means the long way across Nebraska, not the best scenery for distracting the brain. Corn, wheat — it all just looks green at a distance. About twenty thousand fractions later, the truck pulled itself off.

I looked for the strange black truck, but of course it wasn't there. I'd've seen him pass me on the road. I gassed up, parked, and took the kids into the

stop.

Kimberlea wasn't there. Avis was. Didn't really know anyone else, so I sat next to her again.

"That guy left early," she complained.

"Maybe he had to go check on his kid," I said.

"How do you know he has a kid?"

"He's gotta have one or he wouldn't be trucking," I said. "If he didn't bring it in, it must've been in its crib."
"Not much of a parent, if he leaves his kid alone in his truck," Avis said.

I hadn't even thought about that.

"It was probably sleeping, and he didn't want to wake it," I said.

"Why you want to defend him?" she asked.

I shrugged. "No reason. Just seemed to make sense."

"I don't care if he's a lousy parent or Nelly Nurture," she said. (Nelly Nurture is the teenage star of a show on public TV who tells you how to eat when you're pregnant and how to take care of your babies.) "I just care if his parts are all in working order."

Then who should walk in but Cal himself, which Avis saw before I did. "And it looks like a great time to find out!" She jumped up. I couldn't stand to look at the way she embarrassed herself. I wondered at him being right when he said we'd meet again down the road.

"Is this seat taken?" He'd come over to the table, Avis hovering behind him looking mad. More girls were beginning to gather.

"I don't think so."

He sat. "What do you know about teething pain?"

"Well, if you rub his gums it helps. And they sell this stuff in little tubes that numbs them up."

"Could you show me?"

So I took him over to the counter and showed him. He pulled out some vouchers to pay for it. I noticed he had a fat wad of them.

"Will you show me how to use it?"

I told Tomi to look after his baby sister again, and Cal and I went out to the lot, all those female eyes at our backs. There was his truck, black and somehow heavy-looking, without the regular Mack or Peterbilt symbols on it.

"Let's stop at your truck first - I have something I'd like to do."

I unlocked it. He opened the door and got in, reaching down his hand to help me up. Cool, firm hand.

First thing he did was fold down the playpen's walls. The pen is big enough to sleep two big kids, and my mattress behind it is big enough to sleep one fat woman. (I'm not fat.) Fold down the walls, and most of the cab is mattress.

"What are you doing?" I asked, though I thought I knew.

"You'll see," he said. On the right wall of the cab, where it had been covered up by the playpen's wall, there was a little panel. You almost couldn't see it even looking straight at it. The place he pushed to make it pop open didn't look any different from the rest of the wall. Inside was a number display, what they call liquid crystal, and a whole lot of tiny little switches. He started messing with them.

"What are you doing?" I asked again.

"Just a second." He messed around some more, closed up the panel, and smiled at me. "Now your central controller's computer thinks you're still on the road and haven't even gotten here yet. Then i'll register you coming here and starting your break in forty minutes. You've got an hour before you have to get going again."

"How can you do that?"

"I've got a few skills."

"If you can do that kind of thing, why are you driving a truck? You could

be making real money."

There was a glitter in Cal's eye. He bowed his head down low and said some woman's name—Ellen or something, it was hard to hear. I went over and held his head up against my chest, with his braid snaked over the crook of my arm. Murmured nonsense again. His arms came up around my back and my hands went down behind his iean.

We used every last inch of that mattress space.

"Oh Christ," I said later, "my babies have been in the stop all this time."

"They'll be okay," he said.

I put the rubber band back on his braid. I'd been playing with it. "They are never alone this long. And what about Jess?" He looked at me. "You said he had teething pain."

"Oh — my god, you're right. I'd better get to him." He started pulling his pants on.

"Do you want me to help show you how to use the medicine?"

"No, that's okay. I'm sure I can figure it out."

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"It's no trouble --"

"The instructions are on the tube, right? You go get your kids." He looked at his watch. "You've got ten more minutes."

Ten minutes left! I hadn't been stopped this long in two years.

I left him off at his truck and he kissed me right out in public. "See you next stop," he said.

I hadn't even thought of seeing him again. On the trucking routes, he could have any action he wanted. But if I was his first since Ellen or Helen or whoever, maybe it actually meant something to him.

I felt a little bad about that.

Tomi was sitting in the big pen, holding Cilehe and crying. Not screaming or anything — his face was wet and he was hiccupping. When I came in, I could see him trying to look brave. He also looked surprised — like he thought I was dead and was amazed to see me.

"C'mon guys," I said. When we got out, the big black truck was gone. I had to raise the playpen walls, which took a while since I'd never had

them down before. Finally I found the catch that did it. My watch beeped, I pressed the button, and we started off.

Nebraska's a wide state. We probably had another whole stretch of it. At some point I noticed my watch had changed time an hour earlier — Mountain Time Zone. That's one way to measure progress: time travel. Another is to measure the money you save, but unless you're Kimberlea, that's pointless. Just as pointless to measure by the calendar, since Friday's just like Wednesday's just like Sunday, and night is like day but dark and not as many stops.

Another is to measure the seasons go by. But you spend some time driving in the south where it's warmer in winter than North Dakota is some summers. And you spend so little time outside that the weather might as well be television, except for rainstorms crashing against the cab's roof. The babies never get used to that.

Or you can measure the seasons of your own body. Now that means something, because I've always been as regular as clockwork.

For example, I knew it was just about ten days before my next period.

The kids were fussy. Even Tomi. He wanted me to hold him and he wouldn't let me let go. Cilehe screamed. After an hour I blew up.

"If you don't shut up, I'll drive off without you next time!"

Cilehe screamed louder. Tomi's eyes went round and he bit his lips in like he as afraid a word would come out by itself if he didn't hold it back, and tears came down his face like crazy.

"Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry, Mama'd never do that. Mama'd never do that? If he'd been bigger, I'd have told him how much trouble I'd be in at the next checkpoint if I didn't have the kids registered to me. Truck's not much, but jail's worse. Or I might have tried to explain I love my babies and everything I was doing was for them as much as me.

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Instead I rocked him until he fell asleep in my lap, while Cilehe cried herself out.

When the truck pulled over, the black truck was there. We parked, I jumped out, and Cal was waiting. "Got something for you," he said to Tomi, and from behind his back he pulled out a big bag of M&Ms. "Can you share those with your little sister?"

I shot him a look. It was an awful lot of candy. But Tomi was so excited I could hardly take it away from him. Cal took Tomi's other hand and we all went into the stop.

"Why don't we grab a couple of burgers and eat in your truck?" Cal said. "Sure." I explained to Tomi that Mama'd be gone for a while, but was coming back, "Be brave for Cilehe," I said.

Cal messed with those switches again while I wolfed down my cheeseburger. You can get really horny again in just a few hours, especially when it's been almost three years since the time before.

He lay with his head on my stomach. "You've really got nice kids," he said

"Thanks"

"Do they look like their fathers?"

"Actually, I think they favor me more. Too bad for them."

"I don't have any complaints," he said quietly, drawing his hand along the bottom of my jaw.

I felt I was blushing, though I'm a little dark for that, "Go on,"

"Your boy's a real little man. What's his name again?"

"Tomi."

"Tomi, right. I hope Jess grows up like that."

"I'm sure he will."

"Do your kids get along well?"

"Sure, Tomi's a great big brother. Kids can get to feel responsible for each other sometimes."

"Do you think so?"

I laughed. "When they aren't trying to kill each other. But I'm glad they have each other. I never had any sisters or brothers. My mama got some kind of infection in her tubes that stopped her from having more babies. I'm sorry about that sometimes,"

"But you had friends, other kids you grew up with."

"Yeah"

He looked away. "Jess will never have a sister. He's never spent more than an hour in the company of the same children."

I brushed back the little pieces of hair around his forehead with my fingers. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing you can do about it." Then he looked straight up at me, his light brown eyes real intense. "Except maybe there is."

"What do you mean?"

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"Loan me one of your kids."

"What?"

He pulled himself up out of my lap and took my shoulders. "Let one of your kids ride in my truck for a leg or two. To play with Jess. To get to know him, and be a big brother or sister to him."

I shook his hands off. "That's crazy, Cal! You can't take off with my baby.

I might never see you again!"

He patted his hand on the little hidden panel. "I told you we'd see each other again before, and how did it turn out?"

"But how do you know we'll even be staying on the same route?"

"Do you think I could make those changes if I didn't have access to your central controller's data through the remote unit?"

I guessed not. Still — "What if there's a checkpoint, and I have one kid too few and you have one too many? We'd both be arrested, and I don't think they'll accept your asking me so nicely as a good excuse."

"Same source of information," he said. "There's no checkpoint on this

route until Utah."

All that from a little panel I hadn't even known was there. "If you can do that sort of stuff," I said, "why aren't you —?"

He put a finger over my lips. "I know I seem complicated," he said. "But just look at me and you'll see how simple I really am. I thought I needed time alone to help me get over —" He stopped and looked away, then he smiled at me. "Now I know I was right." He swapped his own lips for his finger. After a while he leaned back and said, "As a favor to me?"

"1 _"

"Or as a favor to Jess. You're a mother. You know what children need. If you help him out, you'll be being the mother he never had."

This was all coming so fast. My first plan began to be pushed away by a whole different Plan B. Which wasn't a bad plan at all, since it could supply everyone's needs and make all of us happy. Another three hour's drive from now, when I saw how things were going, I'd have a pretty good idea how likely Plan B was.

"All right," I said. "For Jess's sake."

I thought the point of M&Ms was not to get chocolate all over your face.

Cal took a paper napkin and wiped off Cilehe's mouth, gentle and careful, and rubbed his hand through her hair just like a daddy should.

Tomi stared up at him. I realized for the first time he'd never seen a man

"Which one?" Cal asked.

I considered. "Tomi looks scared of you. How about Cilehe?"

"That's fine." He picked her up. "You're coming with me, pretty lady." She started screaming.

"Um — I'm sorry — she's usually not like that." Well, sometimes she'll go a whole day without screaming much. I took her from him and rocked her

until she shut it down. I carried her outside to the big black truck.

"I'll take her from here," Cal said, reaching for my baby.

I suddenly didn't much like the looks of that black truck. "Maybe it's not such a good idea," I said.

"Shawana;" he said. He leaned forward and kissed me; while kissing me, he took Cilche from my arms, smooth as silk. "We'll just try it for this leg. If she's unhappy, she goes straight back with you. Maybe your little boy would like to ride in such a big truck next time, huh?" He said that to Tomi, who stared up at him. "Or you might like to have Jess, later," he said to me. "I'd like you to get to know him."

"I'd like that too," I said.

He smiled. He kissed me again, and he ruffled Tomi's hair with the hand that wasn't holding Cilehe. "See you in a few hours," he said, opened his door, and swung the two of them up into the cab so fast I never got more than a glimpse of it, big and dark like the truck's outside, before the door shut. But then he rolled down the window.

"You're a really special lady, did you know?" he said.

The black truck pulled away.

Tomi started to cry.

"Don't," I said to him, "c'mon, don't cry." We went back to the truck, me pulling and pulling on Tomi's arm, him not wanting to move. "Don't cry, it's okay, everything's wonderful, listen to Mama."

After Nebraska is Colorado, which at least isn't flat all the way through. Tomi usually loves hills and mountains, going up and down. Cilehe hates having her ears pop, hates it worse when they won't pop. I had to keep reminding myself I didn't have to worry about it.

"Where's Cee, Mama? Where's Cee?"

"Just ahead of us, baby. A couple miles ahead. It's okay, baby."

"Where's Cee?" he insisted. I thought his sister could get on my nerves!

"She's fine, Tomi. Watch the TV."

"Where's Cee?"

Helping us get out of this truck, baby. Up with a man who wants a mother for his son, comfort for his bed, and once he has them won't have any reason to stay in these rolling iail Cells. A man who knows enough about computers to get a job that buys stereos and big TVs with channels you can change and nice haircust hat look pretty. A man who's actually wanted to get married, and can want to again.

A man we can all live with just fine, if it means getting out of this truck.

I decided it was some sugar reaction thing making Tomi so cranky and it would wear down. He did get quiet after a while, after I stopped trying to answer his questions.

It seemed like the longest stretch we'd ever driven. I spent it trying out all the different ways Plan B could work. Ways to become a permanent part of

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Cal's life. To get out of the truck. I'd never even begun to guess what it's like in it. Some drivers even have told me they'd thought it would be a great way to get away from their mamas nagging on them all the time. Me, I didn't want to risk an illegal abortion. Some nasty nights I've wondered if I did the right thing.

Then I began to worry if I'd done the right thing having Cilche ride with Cal. She's the cranky one. If she was kicking a shiffit, and if his Jess wasn't the cranky type so he wasn't used to it, he might get a bad impression of me as a mother. It's not my fault she's cranky. Every baby's different. But he might not know that.

When the truck started to pull over, it seemed like three hours. Hell, it seemed like six. I wanted to find out how it had gone, make a little nice with Cal, and let Tomi see his sister so he'd stop pestering me.

It wasn't until we were almost there I saw it wasn't a truck stop.

It was a checkpoint.

There wasn't supposed to be one till Utah! Cal said we were perfectly safe swapping babies until then. Cal was right about everything else — how could be have screwed this up?

There was a knock on the window. "Out of the truck, lady."

"What's this all about?" I called, thinking hard.

"Just come out of the truck, and there won't be any trouble."

There were cops out there, besides the welfare worker who usually just checks your license, makes sure you are who you say you are and your babies are okay. There were cops out there, and they had guns.

"Why do you want to have guns on me?" I called, just to use up some time

"Come on out of the truck," the first cop repeated, but another one said,

"Child abandonment's a serious charge, lady."

Oh Christ, ves. it is. Worst thing they can catch us at aside from welfare

fraud.
"I wouldn't abandon my babies!"

"Maybe so," said the second cop, "but that's not the tip we got from the trucker who just came through."

"She was lying."

"Don't think he was." The cop elbowed his friend and said, "Look at her face. She knows who we're talking about."

The other one sniggered. "You can learn a lot about a girl's secrets when you get a piece of her. Maybe we should start an undercover program! I'd volunteer."

I felt like I'd been hit, but I knew I had to stay cool. "Let me get out and I'll explain."

"That's what we're asking you to do, lady -"

They give you a two-week training before they put you on the road. That's hardly enough to begin to know how to drive the truck manually, and it's a couple years since I even had that. But nobody expects us to ever really have to drive, whatever the emergency regs say.

Maybe that's why it caught them flat-footed when a driver made a break for it. It just wasn't possible.

They were just about right, too.

I leaned forward and yanked the handle marked MANUAL OVERRIDE. I hit the gas. I nearly ran over a cop and I did go right through two trees on my way to the highway. A sound of metal crumpling. I couldn't look at the road much because it took all my concentration shifting gears, trying to pick up some speed. It took all my concentration and it still sounded awful. I wondered if I was stripping gears. I wondered if I could do anything wrong that would crash the truck.

He set me up. He stole my baby and he set me up. Why would he steal my baby?

I leaned hard on my horn. A big RV just got out of my way in time.

He must have known the checkpoint was coming up. And you need at least one kid to be a trucker. If there was no little Jess, he needed a baby. If he could alter his trucking card, make it look like Cilehe was his, then his only problem was me telling them at the same checkpoint I didn't have my other baby because he took her from me. I'd still be in big trouble, but so would he. And with almost no other raws in the trucks. he'd be easy to track down.

(I was afraid I really gave him Cilehe because I was tired of dealing with her fussing all the time. I never asked to be a mother, but I was one — the worst who ever lived.)

Cars were scattering in front of me. Horns blaring. Out of the corner of

out at what was going on.

"Get down, Tomi! Get down!" I grabbed out with my right hand and

"Get down, Tomil Get down!" I grabbed out with my right hand and yanked him down hard on the playpen's mattress. The truck lurched. He went spinning across and hit his head on the other pen wall. The walls are light. I could see it give.

I couldn't look to see if he was okay. I had to keep changing lanes while I went faster.

That bastard made sure they wouldn't listen to me. He told them I was a child abandoner, so then anything I said would sound like a lie, to save my ass. He went on the offensive before I had a chance.

I started to hear sirens.

I went faster. I was almost to top gear, driving on the shoulder because it was too hard to keep going around the cars.

Thank god we were on a flattish stretch.

All the time I thought Cal was someone I could marry to get me and my babies out of the truck, even feeling guilty because I enjoyed his body but I wasn't likely to love him back — all that time he was setting me up.

I realized I was swearing, fast and steady in a low fierce voice. Tomi whim-

pered. At least he was awake.

"You damn black truck - you fucker - where are you, you son of a bitch? - you fucker, you stole my baby - you bastard, you lied to me!"

Lights began flashing in my side mirrors. The cops were catching up. I had to catch him before they caught me.

I shifted up. I was almost at top gear.

A couple cars split in front of me, screeching out of the way, and there was the bastard. He was going uphill. Black smoke belched out of a side pipe. I hit the foot of the hill and I remembered I had to down-shift, fast. The truck couldn't keep that speed climbing. I made myself do it though I just wanted to go faster and faster until I had him -

The truck made horrible noises. I wasn't in the right gear. I slowed and started to lose ground. He must've seen me by now. I shifted, shifted, shifted until it didn't make those awful noises. I didn't care if my truck was trashed - shit, I'd be in prison anyway, my babies god knows where - but I

wasn't going to lose that black monster truck.

He hit the top of the hill and vanished from sight. I got there minutes later - I say minutes, but it must have been five seconds. His truck was picking up speed fast. Mine plunged down while my stomach stayed back up top. Tomi wailed. I shifted up and up and shoved the gas to the floor. I was gaining on him. The lights were close in the side mirrors.

I could make out the face of the nearest cop, he was that close. Could see his little blond moustache, even, and the mean way he looked like he was go-

ing to kill me if I didn't do it for him first.

A red sports car was half an inch in front of me, getting closer. I had to hit the brakes, and the engine almost died. Almost, I was hitting on the gearshifter like it was Cal's face, kicking the accelerator like it was his balls.

The black truck ducked ahead of a blue minivan. The van hit its brakes hard and seemed to come right back into me, like Cal had thrown it into my

face deliberately.

I swerved I missed it

I spent long seconds wrestling with the wheel.

Looked up and saw him cut again in front of some foreign-looking job. He didn't have it figured right. He was going to plow right into a station wagon in the next lane by the shoulder -

"Cilehe!" I screamed. I hit my horn. I careened on the shoulder as he ca-

reened off it. There was a steep hill a few yards off the side of the shoulder, and the

black truck was about to go straight down it -I grabbed Tomi, hit the gas hard, and shut my eyes.

The whole world went white.

It shouldn't have worked. I couldn't see because the airbags came bursting out and filled my face with canyas.

My truck caught his trailer right on the side, smashed into it, and spun his truck around almost facing us. I went mostly straight, destroying my cab but not quite me or Tomi, cushioned in airbag. I picked up a concussion, though.

The black truck came to a stop angled over the side of the hill.

But it didn't roll down.

When the cops helped me out of what was left of my cab, I could hardly see straight. I did see that the black truck's trailer had burst open. I saw broken crates. I saw the ugly black metal shapes inside them. And, thank god, I didn't see Cal. If I'd seen him, I don't know what I would have done to him, concussion and all.

I screamed until they put Cilehe in my arms. She was so quiet and good you'd swear she was her brother.

I had time to think in the hospital. When my head cleared — before then, if you believe the nurses — I demanded they run the tests. It was the biggest relief of my life to learn Plan A hadn't worked. A little bit of Cal growing inside me is the last thing I wanted. I know a baby has nothing to do with his daddy. I'm sure no Shawn Parker. But I wanted no piece of Cal. The plan to have three kids so they'd let me out seems a foolish, childish thing now.

I made them tell me about Cal. They acted like I had no right to know, but they gave in enough to tell me that his real name was Charles Kavey, he was single and had assets of over a million, and was — surprise — no welfare trucker. He worked with his controller, and they made, said the government lawyer type, "lilicit shipments."

I bet. I don't know anything about high-tech weapons, but I guess I can tell the ugly things when I see them. Interstate 80 could've taken him on to San Francisco, and from there I imagine they could have been smuggled either down to Chile or to the civil war in the Philippines. (News comes on twice a day in the truck, though I always wonder what they're leaving out of it.)

Cal — Charles — and his buddy must have had the system pretty well bamboozled, all the parts that are just computer talking to computers but when it comes to the checkpoints, human beings make sure your babies match up with what it says on the license. No way around needing a real live kid for that. I guess when he found out about the surprise checkpoint, he was already on the road. He had it down so smooth, he must have used his little trick for getting a kid before. I couldn't even have identified him, if it had ever come to that. He didn't have the braid when he got to the checkpoint — it actually came off somehow, which surprised the hell out of me—and his hair was black and his eyes were dark blue. Contacts and dye. He was real smooth. The bastard enioved it too. I bet. Bastard.

He'd had to perform his act on short notice — unless it was a dream when I heard the nurses gossiping. When I did dream after that, the dreams were full of nightmares about a shriveled-up little body jammed in a carton

among all the weapons in the black truck's trailer.

Probably the baby's name wasn't even really Jess. . . .

My grandma called the hospital. She wanted to know if she could help. She's got so little I hated to ask her, but I did.

After all, I'm back in the truck as soon as the hospital releases me, and I don't want to stay there.

But if I don't eat desserts, don't buy new clothes and makeup for myself, and take what my grandma can give me, I can start studying. Kimberlea manages; so can I. Even with my allowance cut in half in penalty for smashing up the truck. I can read really good. I'm going to take Kimberlea for a role model and order myself some accounting textbooks. Maybe even, years from now, when I'm out and I've gotten used to computers, I can go on studying and get a truck controller's license.

Nobody's going to make me keep doing what they want me to do. My babies are going to be proud of their mama.

SF CLICHÉS VII: THE BIG COMPUTER

Somebody asked it if there were a God: It hummed, and said with synthovoice serene, "I was about to ask you that. How odd." They thought when first they threw the big red switch The datanet would unify the race: They never dreamed the AC line would glitch. (At Babel something similar took place.) Some say they're built to rule, and human hearts Shall beat to crystal time; I think they can't, As long as lowest bidders make the parts; But if they should, then here's the magic chant To keep them busy, and our breed alive: 3.14 15 92 65 ...

The day they powered up the great machine,

- John M. Ford

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SEARCHING FOR ALIEN ARTIFACTS by Gregory Benford

Gregory Benford is a professor of physics at the University of California, Irvine, and a notable science-fiction writer and essayist. His previous tales in Amazing" Stories include "Freezeframe" (May 1887), "Alphas" (March 1888), and "The Rose and the Scalpel" (Jamary 1990). His essays "Hard's Science Fiction?" (July 1887), "Pandering and Evasions" (January 1888), "The Designers' Universe" (November 1988), and "Pascal's Terror" (July 1889) have also appeared in our pages.

Interstellar travel is a prodigiously expensive proposition. Sending a manned expedition to a nearby star would take about a thousand times the total energy now used annually in the United States. Though colonization of the planets seems a plausible long-term goal for us, an interstellar expedition would take about a hundred million times more energy than establishing settlements on Mars.

Numbers like these lead many to assume that no alien technological society has ever carried out far-flung exploration of the galaxy. Though surely any older race would have to expend vast reserves to send ships to our star, we should be careful in ruling out the prospect. We humans built the pyramids and climbed Mount Everest with no rational motive and at much cost. Of course, we have also abandoned great projects, like the Apollo missions to our moon. Similarly, for decades we have had the technical ability to build a truly spectacular building a mile high, but we don't. Judging the limits to the grandiosity of a species, even our own, is not easy.

Also, there are dangers in such assumptions, because they can stop us from considering how first contact might conceivably occur locally, near Earth. This idea animates the greatest

of science-fiction films, 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Thue, we have found no monoliths or other records of alien visits.— at least, none we can seriously credit. But this may come from our lack of imagination, our inability to look in the right places. It think it is worth the time to seriously, dispassionately look into the possibility that intelligent beings may have visited Earth, or ventured into the solar system sometime in the distant past.

Thinking about this question in a systematic way is not easy. We are trained to believe that good, hard, nononsense thinking is the best way to attack problems. But here something different is needed — soft thinking, if you will. By this I mean the ability to speculate but remain within boundaries.

After all, any extraterrestrials who visited Earth possessed technology (and perhaps wisdom) far beyond our own. We should be properly humble about what such beings could do. This demands mental flexibility, to say the least.

It might well be that a race capable of journeying among the stars will possess a technology we would not even recognize, much less understand. Add to this the fact that these beings

are truly alien, so completely strange that we could not even begin to count the ways they may be different — and the problem looks insoluble.

I don't believe things are quite so bad. We needn't guess every facet of a visitor's behavior; we only need to check if they have left anything behind as a calling card. Such an artifact must be recognizably artificial. If it was constructed by an alien intelligence it should stand out — indeed, was designed to do just that. Even here there are limits, though.

Let's look, for a moment, at one of the natural world's most fascinating coincidences. At total eclipse, when our moon moves between us and the sun, a beautiful display occurs. The round moon perfectly overlaps the sun's disk. Streamers of hor gas continually boil up from the sun's surface, jets forming a bright halo around the moon. This is a remarkable effect, quite dramatic. No other moon in the solar system provides such a floor show for its planet.

show for its planet.

Is this accidental? The moon has not always been in its present orbit, after all; tides drive it away from Earth at a rate of about two feet a year. A few hundred thousand years in the past (or the future) this exactly correct overlapping of the sun's and moon's disks would not occur. No doubt eclipses would still be impressive, but much less so than now. It is striking that man's inquiring intelligence has evolved at just the right moment to appreciate this beautiful accident.

Or perhaps this additional coincidence — man's rise to civilization and the exact eclipse occurring at the same time — is no coincidence at all. Did some alien visitor accurately predict the evolution of intelligent apes and leave this massive signpost in our sky? The idea may seem odd, even absurd,

but it is not impossible; aliens, after all, will think strangely. This notion illustrates that the boundary between artifacts and natural coincidences is blurred.

Still, though we cannot anticipate the possible accomplishments of an alien technology, we can require that our knowledge of physical law and information not be violated.

Let's take a simple example. There is a cliché story plot that runs some thing like this an alien interstellar expedition runs into trouble and must make an emergency landing on a lush, green, uninhabited planet. There is another disaster; maybe the native animals or bacteria kill most of the ship's crew. All but two of the aliens die. In the closing lines we learn that the virgin planet is third from its star, and the two aliens are named Adam and Eve.

This is nonsense for several reasons. The alien body chemistry would have to be exactly like the native life's — digesting the same sugars and amino acids, manufacturing blood cells based on hemoglobin, requiring precisely the same vitamins, and so on. This is most unlikely.

Even worse, how could we then explain the similarities we have with other primates? Did aliens bring them along, too? Fossil evidence shows a clear, continuous line of descent for mankind, all the way from 25 million years ago. Our ancestor Proconsul certainly wasn't smart enough to build a spaceship, and even if he had been, why was he so peculiarly adapted to the ecology of Earth? No, we are undeniably the sons and daughters of this Earth. We weren't dropped into our niche by accident. Similarly, the integrated nature of all Earthly life, with its common chemical schemes and DNA-based reproduction, strongly suggests that no alien biology ever gained a foothold here. Leaving wildly different organisms as a signpost would be a tricky proposition, simply because they would have to compete with hardy natives. Recent discoveries of plants using unusual chemistries in deep sea volcanic vents prompted some speculation about how ancient these forms were, but they do seem to fit into local evolution. Unless even stranger forms lurk in some dark corner, we may dismiss the idea of biografifacts as calline cards.

bioartifacts as calling cards. In the same way, we have to be careful about accepting any historical "evidence" of extraterrestrials. We need something more than vague legends about marvelous, miracleworking beings who live in the sky. Virtually all religions, past and present, require that the gods live underground or above the clouds. (After all, where else could they live over the next hill? Then an unbeliever could refute an entire theology in an afternoon's walk.) Recently, Soviet ethnologists conjectured that stories from the Bible are garbled versions of alien visits - even that Sodom and Gomorra were destroyed by an atom bomb. There is simply no evidence for these ideas. Enough time has passed to erase radioactive elements or any other signature. Similarly, Biblical accounts of spaceship-like objects in the sky leave us with nothing to check.

A legend is only an aged yarn leading nowhere. We need something solid and unmistakable before such theories become anything more than armchair speculation.

At various times people have come forward with artifacts that they thought were evidence of alien visits. Some were well-meaning and others outright frauds. A Scotsman thought fused towers in Ireland and Scotland

were works of high technology; it turned out they had been fired with peat, a process the Scotsman didn't know. Etruscan gems were mistakenly taken by some to be gifts from extraterrestrials because they seemed strange and sophisticated; they were finally proven to be man-made. Amateur archaeologists studied Sahara frescoes and saw what they thought were Martians in helmets. These created quite a stir until it was pointed out that the "helmets" were ritual masks well known in the area for centuries. "Dr. Gurlt's Cube," a steel parallelepiped found embedded in an ancient bed of coal, got quite a lot of press coverage but proved to be a hoay

hoax.

Lacking any historical evidence we can be reasonably sure of, we can turn our attention to the possibility that other beings left artifacts on or near the Earth even before (or while) man evolved. In 2001: A Space Odyszey, Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick called this artifact a "monolith" and endowed it with a decided theological purpose: the uplifting of man. This was a good dramatic device, but it is not the only role an artifact could fulfill.

fulfill.

A secondary function of the monolith was set forth in an early Arthur C. Clarke story, "The Sentinel!" Here the idea was that the aliens left some guidepost or sentinel that would trigger a sign (a warning?) when man reached a certain technological level. This seems reasonable if our visitors wanted to know immediately when we developed. After all, they might want ample notice that we had discovered nuclear weapons or space travel, rather than learn a few centuries hence, when we come visiting them.

There is another role an artifact can play, beyond that of monolith or sentinel. Keep in mind that the distances between the stars are vast, our galaxy is many billions of years old, and intelligent races may not live very long in comparison. An alien expedition passing through our solar system long ago might never expect to return, or even to remain in this neighborhood of the galaxy. They may, from experience with other races, know that civilizations do not survive for long on the cosmic time scale. Chances that Earth would evolve a culture worth knowing while our visitors' society was functioning were quite remote.

Why, then, leave anything behind at all? It is impossible to read the motivations of beings we can neither meet nor understand, but we can guess that the same urge that made them travel among the stars might give them some perspective on the ebb and flow of life in the universe. Perhaps they would leave some sign on Earth, as if to say, "Your intelligence is not alone." Even more, their artifact might serve as a legacy. In it they could store information, both scientific and "humanistic," that could extend the lifetime of a civilization. Perhaps it would serve as an epitaph for their own race, a kind of last defiant gesture against the forces of entropy that bring down intelligent societies.

Monolith, sentinel, legacy — these are only vague guesses, necessarily anthropomorphic ones, at the motivations of superior beings.

Then too, the agency that leaves the artifact may not be a living member of another race at all. The stars might be explored by computerized ships, not flesh and blood.

Sending living beings on voyages many light-years in length is expensive and very inefficient, compared to computer-directed flights. NASA's experience indicates that unmanned probes cost a thousandth as much as manned ones. Even a vast, wealthy society would probably prefer to send unmanned ships for exploration, and use members of their own species only on definite missions (say, colonization) to a known destination. John von Neumann, a great, innovative physicist, imagines that advanced computing machines could self-reproduce, using only raw materials. Set loose in the galaxy, such machines could spread like rabbits in Australia. If so, we should see a night sky clogged with orbiting craft looking for asteroids to devour. We don't, so probably this means that intelligent spacefarers don't unleash galaxy-gobbling devices, for sound, "ecological" reasons. After all, they may well value contact with others for cultural exchange, and see more in our solar system than a large asteroid belt to mine.

However, even if we dismiss the argument that earlier alien societies would have filled the galaxy, we should also remember the vast time scales that figure into interstellar exploration. Light takes many years to travel from one star to the next. Spaceships, even if they can travel at near light speed (a feat we are nowhere near mastering), would take very long indeed to visit the hundred billion stars of our galaxy. Man has been around in identifiable form only about 2 million years, Cro-Magnon man (ourselves) is about 25,000 years old. Written records go back 7,000 years. These may seem like long times to us, who are granted only three score and ten. But life has been on Earth for billions of years and could have aroused the curiosity of a passing computerized spaceship long before man appeared.

If intelligence inevitably arises, once a stable ecology evolves on a planet,

automated visitors might have been under instructions to leave some arti-

fact. Where would they put it?
One obviously safer place is away
from Earth entirely, in orbit about the
sun. (A billion years ago it might have
seemed equally likely that intelligence
would evolve on Mars or Earth, so a
signifier might be left in orbit between
them.) This probe, left behind by the
main ship, would wait — drawing
power from the sun — until it detected
signs of intelligent life on a nearby
planet. From such a distance the only
reliable evidence would be radio signals, the first indication of what we
call modern technology.

If a radio signal ever came, the probe could simply repeat this signal, aiming its radio beam back at the source. A computer program could establish a common language, once firm contact occurred. This system has the advantage that the probe's radio signal, coming from a nearby orbit, would be much more powerful than a beam from the probe's home star, many light-years away. Also, the target planet need not have very sensitive receivers.

Such a repeated playback would undoubtedly attract the attention of the natives — imagine the surprise of Marconi if he had found a mysterious echo to every transmission he made. For our purposes, the matter might be laid to rest right there: Marconi heard no echoes, therefore such a probe doean't exist. But transmissions were weak in the early days of radio and may not have penetrated well through our inonsphere.

In 1935 Carl Stormer and Balthasar van der Pol, studying the atmospheric propagation of radio waves, detected echoes returning many seconds after the original signal. The time lag indicated reflection from an object many times as far away as the moon. These stood as riddles until the 1970s, when a British electronics engineer, Anthony Lawton, repeated the experiments. He showed that refraction in the ionized regions of our upper atmosphere can give such delays, and concluded wrly that "long-delayed echoes would be a constitution of the contract of t

as conspicuous as possione.

It seems unlikely that a probe orbiting around our sun would simply stay there, giving no sign of its presence and waiting to be found. Picking out even a mile-sized object so far away is very difficult.

There are ways of narrowing down the search, though. In the early 1980s F. Valdes and R. A. Freitas, Ir., searched the Lagrange points for artifacts. These are locations in space that allow remarkably stable orbits. An object left there would not be tugged by the weak but persistent influences of the distant planets. There are two Lagrange points near our moon where the combined influence of the Earth and moon would allow an object to remain fixed for roughly a billion years. Valdes and Freitas looked for shiny objects reflecting sunlight and found nothing at these points, down to their observing limit of objects a few meters in size. This was reported in

Icarus, Vol. 55, p. 453.

In the middle 1980s Michael Papagiannis of Boston University suggested using the infrared images of the night sky in another, similar pursuit. He reasoned that interstellar voyagers, whether living or mechanical, would of necessity have plentiful energy sources. Thus, they would not need to come close to our star to gather solar

energy, but instead would most probably use another resource: the asteroid belt. There are metals, organic compounds (in carbonaceous asteroids), and possibly even ice - all available in very low gravity. Asteroids range from Ceres (1,025 km across) down to many thousands more of kilometer size, all orbiting between 2.3 and 3.3 times as far from the sun as the Earth. Papagiannis proposed using the extensive survey of the night sky taken by the USA's IRAS satellite to study about 10,000 faint infrared dots, emission from asteroids. He wanted to look for odd spectra that suggested temperatures higher than what one would expect for a body heated by sunlight that far away, a "major artificial obiect." His reasoning was that working ships or colonies - monolith, sentinel, or legacy - might use enough energy to stand out against the ordinary asteroids, much as our cities are glaringly visible in the infrared compared with the countryside. Thus far Papagiannis has not found enough funding from NASA to conduct his search.

Without such a signature, there is little reason to visit just any small dab of light that orbits our sun. One place we have visited at great cost, though, and will probably go on visiting, is our moon. Aliens might well have put the artifact there — whether monolith, sentinel, legacy, or some unimaginable variant. It would be difficult to ensure the stability of orbits around the sun or Earth for millions of years, but planting the artifact on the moon would anchor it securely so that it would not gradually drift away from Earth.

Once there, covering the artifact with a few feet of lunar dust would bring another benefit: no more erosion by particles streaming out of the sun (the solar wind) or interstellar space (cosmic rays). True, by the same stroke it becomes vulnerable to the occasional geological activity on the moon. Also, large incoming meteorites could still damage it. These are unavoidable dangers, but by leaving several widely spaced artifacts scattered over the moon, the odds against all of them being destroyed by outsized meteorites can be made quite good.

There is another trouble with this theory — we have circled the moon and landed on it, and no friendly radio message came out to greet us. Should we conclude that nothing is waiting for us there? Not necessarily.

For one thing, Kubrick and Clarke could be right. The tip-off that a monolith lies buried somewhere may be subtle, such as a local warping of the magnetic field. Or, as in "The Sentine!," the object may be a small pyramid sitting atop a mountain peak that literally must be stumbled across before humans recognize it for what is. If these ideas are right, only a full-scale exploration of our moon could turn up anything interesting.

On the other hand, the radiation damage mentioned above may be more important than we think. Sensitive electronic components made today cannot withstand constant bombardment by high-energy particles; they must be shielded. If an alien artifact were to remain on the moon, operating for millions or even billions of years, blocking out the radiation must be a very serious issue. This means the object will be buried at least a few meters deep. Moon dust and gravel above it will stop particles, yes — and also radio transmissions.

To get around this, it would probably be best to have the artifact periodically protrude a radio antenna to the surface. There it would listen for transmission from the Earth. The sun

is noisy in the radio wavelengths. To cut down on this noise, a sophisticated artifact would probably surface its antenna when the sun is below the moon's horizon.

What is a reasonable interval between appearances of the antenna? There is absolutely no way to tell. Over the long wearing course of eons, even a simple matter of extending an antenna can run afoul of accidents, so the period should not be too short. On the other hand, if the artifact were loshort. On the other hand, if the artifact were low rapidly humanity advanced, a frequency of once a century might be reasonable. A sentinel that last emerged in 1890, before Marconi, would then be readying to look again in 1990.

All these factors depend strongly on precisely why the artifact was left. If it were a technological sentinel, to announce our graduation to the space-flight level, the moon is a good site. Even better, place it on the moon's other side, away from Earth. Then no freak radio contact with an Earth-bound station would have occurred in our history.

our history. If something is buried on the moon's far side, and it does not surface frequently, contact with it may be postponed indefinitely. NASA plans (and probably Soviet ones, too) call for very little activity on the far side in the foreseeable future - and difficulty of direct radio communication is one of the reasons. We may be in for a long wait for a call from a far-side sentinel. Nonetheless, it would be wise to keep an ear cocked for a stray signal that might be an aged but still functioning near-side sentinel, struggling to get through our ionosphere and be picked out of the commercially generated noise we ourselves are making. It would be ironic if we were blotting out word from the stars with a thick layer of corn flakes advertisements and *Star Trek* episodes.

There is another role an alien artifact might play that opens unexplored avenues: the legacy. Earth's visitors may have erected a memorial to themselves, a message to future inhabitants. On a small metallic chip we can even now write an enormous wealth of knowledge; not much space would be required to leave a rich library inside some relatively indestructible vault.

Much cannot be conveyed by simple language alone, as every artist will tell you, and so objects might be left in the vault as well. Such a legacy would be of unimaginable benefit to mankind, a sort of colossal pharaoh's tomb containing new science and new cultures. Discovery of this legacy would be the most important event in human history.

The legacy could be left in places we've already discussed — in distant orbit, or on the moon. But our visitors may be very wise beings indeed, and realize that all cultures need not develop very far technologically. What if Earth's natives never reached orbit or the moon?

the moon?

Lacking any data, we have no idea how probable it is that intelligence and technology are linked. Certainly if Earth were a planet of an older star, our crust would have fewer metals and heavy elements and we would have a hard time building spaceships. More to the point, do intelligent creatures necessarily desire technology? Our visitors must — otherwise they would never get here — but they might have encountered races who simply didn't think along technological lines.

We may have an example of such a race already on Earth: the dolphins. Our descendants may well remember our inability to recognize dolphin intelligence as our greatest folly, because we do habitually equate thinking with tool-making. But an alien visiting Earth two million years ago might have found the dolphins the obvious evolutionary path for high intelligence. Dolphins are conspicuous in the oceans, making acoustic gossip picked up miles away, but who would take the time to scour the African forests for elusive tribes of tool-using primates? Or, realizing that dolphins and primates (which are the same age, evolutionarily) both had a good chance to form civilizations, aliens might have decided to leave a legacy that would be reached by both species.

After all, if you're leaving a legacy for a race you will very probably never meet again, does it matter whether they are fish or land-rover, tool-users or not? The dolphins might never discover fire, develop chemical fuels or alloy metals - they certainly haven't vet. So they couldn't reach the moon. even though they might have great use for the cultural record left by the visitors. Exploring the land would be difficult for dolphins, and flying in the air more so. The most obvious spot to leave a legacy for the dolphins would be the oceans.

The trouble with leaving any artifact beneath or near the wind, wave, and tide of the sea is obvious - erosion. The aliens would need to be very sure their legacy would be read and understood very soon - in which case, why not just teach it directly to the dolphins during their visit? (Which raises an interesting possibility: perhaps the dolphins already have the legacy, transmit it by word of mouth to each generation, and don't consider us worthy of receiving it. Touché, fisherman!) In any case, an artifact left in the sea is surely gone by now. There remains the possibility that the legacy

might be left on land, either for us or for some future dolphin civilization. Where would it be?

Some place with little erosion, certainly, far from the oceans, away from areas of geological activity or places where large land animals could interfere with it. If the drifting of Earth's continents is typical of planets, and if our visitors knew the dynamics of plate tectonics, they could have selected sites with few earthquakes. volcanoes, or other severe changes.

The erosion rate is high near mountain and glaciers, so we can write off the great mountain ranges and many sites too near the north or south poles. The great band of tectonic stress that loops over our planet like a baseball seam makes many other places, such as the California coast, unlikely. The Canadian sheet, a great area of very old, stable formations, would serve quite well if the glaciers had not so (relatively) lately steamfollered it. And so it goes for a large fraction of the Earth.

Two sites do look promising: the interior desert of Australia and some southern portions of the Mongolian plateau. Australia offers the added bonus of being relatively cut off from Africa, where man apparently evolved, Our visitors might well have decided to leave any artifact as far from Africa as possible, reasoning that we would be further advanced by the time we found it.

Both these sites are relatively unexplored even today. Little grows there and few animals of any size are native. Many parts of Australia in particular are extremely hard to reach without mechanized transport or great endurance.

I am not a geologist and the matter of guessing what sites have been most stable for very long times is a complicated one, best left to experts. The important point is that such sites may exist. Just this knowledge is not enough, though, because we return to the essential mystery of this whole discussion: who (or what) are we dealing with? What sort of artifact would be left behind? How can we recognize it?

Obviously, it must not seem natural. But after lying on the Earth's surface for perhaps millions of years, it could hardly look very artificial by now. It must be covered by dust and gravel at least, if not rock formations of much greater weight. Without knowing specifically what its builders had in mind, we cannot reasonably guess whether it could be designed to stay above ground or not. It is impossible to say whether aliens who can fly between the stars (or send computerized ships instead) possess materials that can resist normal erosion, or have other special properties that give them away. Certainly if the artifact were large enough - say, the size of a mountain - and very regular in shape, we could spot it easily enough. Since we haven't, we should look for some more subtle beacon.

There are many attention-getting signs that do not depend on size regular arrays, say, or differences in the quality of the light an object gives off (polarization or odd spectra). What kind of regularities? What sort of light? The possibilities are endless. For example, radar searches from orbit have already peered beneath the Sahara sands, finding "fossil" river valleys in the rock layers below. Radial rays cut in rock, pointing to a central desert. Similar methods will doubtlessly emerge as our surveys improve. The best we can do is look for the unexpected, and look very thoroughly. Here we are in luck. We have detailed aerial photographic surveys of our planet, made both from orbit and low-flying aircraft. Wide regions never before studied have been photographed through infrared and ultraviolet filters. The photographs are so well systematized that information can be found from them conveniently and efficiently.

In the 1970s, after the first photos from Mars arrived via Mariner, it was pointed out that similar pictures of the Earth with an optical resolution of one kilometer would have shown little evidence of man's civilization. Certainly, we will need far greater resolution to see one lone artifact standing in an arid desert. Thus, photos that display great detail will have to be painstakingly analyzed with a completely open mind.

A curious arrangement of a ridge line, a concentric pattern of rock formations, perhaps an abnormally high reflectivity in the ultraviolet or odd polarization — any of these could be either pure accident or, on the other hand, the first subtle clue.

Admittedly, there may be nothing in the Australian wastes or anywhere else. But a survey designed to discover such sites — or oddities on the moon, in the asteroids, or at spots like the Lagrange points — could yield interesting and significant insights into conventional astronomy or geology.

Healthy skepticism is important. Such searches already verge near the interests of innumerable cranks. We risk being discredited if we give each possibility less than scrupulous study. For example, the "face on Mars" ferreted out from photos of that surface is certainly a strange formation, and may repay study. It is almost certainly a natural effect, but overenthusiasm has already driven many scientists away from further work.

Passive listening for radio calls requires that aliens be sending just as we choose to hear. The chances of this temporal coincidence may be quite small. Searching for artifacts can succeed if visitors passed by anytime in the last several billion years.

This vast advantage should encourage us to undertake inexpensive

searches. Computer analysis and image enhancement promise to make such studies possible as side projects to more mundane surveys, using few resources. The important point is that flexibility and an eye for oddities may vield enormous, incalculable rewards.

A STRANGE ATTRACTION

He's a general. Rules star systems they say. Scowls storms above 3-inch inset fangs.

Bracelets orbit elbows.

Rings enforce his brows,

Paprika hair floats to his waist -

Adds a promise of bloodshed

Rather than civility.

Two rows from me, a cadet faints

From the arrow of his gaze.

A sheep-like rustle brushes the ranks -Crystalline fears of his command.

Noticed, he closes the distance

Between us like a battle cruiser

Swallowing its enemy.

No falter in stance, his eyes

Probe my soul.

You're not frightened, he says. No, just repulsed.

Indignity burns his eyes red.

A collective gasp vacuums the air

From the room.

He asks, why do you cater death? I answer, why do you court ugliness?

Repulsed, we become lovers.

- Colleen Anderson

THE DIPLOMACY GUILD by David Brin

art: Terry Lee

David Brin has won many Hugo, Locus, and Nebula awards for his novels and short fiction. His most recent Hugo and Locus awards were for his novel The Uplift War (Bantam, 1987).

In addition to writing, David's hobbies include backpacking, music, public speaking, environmental activism, science, and general eclecticism.

"I have heard it suggested that you humans have this queer obsession because you live so hot and fast. You sense time's current at your backs, and so feel you must *copy* yourselves in order to be two places at once."

Phss'aah's words flowed so musically from the translator grille that it was easy to lose the Cephallon philosopher's meaning in the harmonies. Anyway, I had been distracted for a moment or two by the whining of my other guest, the miserable Crotonite huddled in the corner — a pathetic figure, whimpering and uselessly flexing broken remnants that had once been powerful wings.

One more burdensome responsibility. I cursed fate and my boss's meddling for saddling me with the creature — cruelly scorned by his own kind, and yet ambassador plenipotentiary from a powerful interstellar race.

Phss'aah's words shook me from perusing my newest guest. I turned back to the huge tank taking up half the volume of my ship's Visitor Suite, where a vazuely norpoise-like form flailed oxygen-rich water into a froth.

"I'm sorry..." and I made the wet sound approximating Phss'aah's name as near as a descendant of Earth humans could form it. "I didn't quite catch that last remark."

Bubbles rose from the Cephallon's twin exhalation slits, and now I read what might be mild exasperation in the flex of his long snout. Instead of repeating himself, Phss'ash waved a stubby, four-fingered flipper-arm toward the aqua-bot that shared his tank. The bulbous machine planted a sucker on the glassy wall and spoke in its owner's stead.

"I believe Master Phss'aah is proposing a hypothesis as to why humans—you Erthuma—were the only one of the Six Starfaring Races to invent true autonomous robots. He suggests it is because you have such short natural life spans. Being ambitious, your race sought ways to extend themselves artificially. In order to be many places at once, they put much of themselves into their machines."

I shook my head. "But our lives aren't any shorter than Locrians', or



Nexians' -- "

"Correction," the robot interrupted. "You're counting up an individual's sum span of years, including all his or her consecutive natural lifetimes. You've had four Renewals, Ambassador Dorning, totaling three hundred and four standard Earth years.

"But my master apparently thinks your Erthumoi world view is still colored by the way existence was for you during the ages leading to High Civilization. In any event, your race invented artificially intelligent constructs like me well before learning how to Renew."

The machine — and Phss'aah — did have a point. Not for the first time I tried to imagine what it must have been like for my ancestors, facing certain death after only a single span of less than ninety standard years. Why, at my first Renewal I was still barely formed . . . an infant! I'd only completed one profession by then.

How strange that most humans, back in olden times, became parents as early as thirty years of age. In most modern nations of the Galactic Erthuma, you weren't even supposed to think about breeding until the middle of your second life, when you were mature enough for the responsibilities of reproduction.

All this time Phss'aah was watching me through the glass with one eye, milky blue and inscrutable. I almost regretted human-invented technology enabled the Cephallon to use his robot mouthpiece as yet another veil to shelter behind. Though, of course, getting Phss'aah to rely on this fancy assistant-drone was actually quite a coup. The idea was to sell large numbers of such machines to the water race, and then each of the other Big Five, so they'd get used to what some called the "bizarre Erthumoi notion" of intelligent devices . . . robots. Frankly, we newcomer humans could use the trade credits.

"Hmmm," I answered cautiously. "But the Crotonites" — I nodded in the general direction of my unwanted guest in the corner — "have even shorter life spans Atan natural, old-style humans, and they don't even Renew! Why then, didn't they invent robots? It's not for lack of skill with machines. They're more nimble than anybody, with unsurpassed craftsmanship. And Space knows they have easily as much or more ambition than anybody else."

The Čephallon rose to the surface to breathe and returned trailing bubbles. When he spoke, the wall unit conveyed an Erthumoi translation, this time bypassing the robot.

"You reply logically and well for one of your kind. I don't know the answer to that. Certainly you and the Crotonites share the quick metabolisms characteristic of breathers of supercharged oxygen atmospheres. They, however, are oviparous flyers, while you are descended from arboreal mammals. Mammals are greegrious—"

"Some mammals."

"Indeed." And some of Phss'aah's irritation briefly showed. Cephallons do not like being interrupted while pontificating an elegant new theory. That was exactly why I did it, of course.

Diplomacy is such a delicate business.

"Perhaps another reason you invented intelligent machines was because —"

This time the interruption was not my fault. The door behind me opened with a soft hiss, and my own secretary 'bot hovered into the Visitor Suite, floating on magnetic induction waves.

"Yes, Betty, what is it?" I asked.

"Messages received," she said tersely. "High priority, from Erthuma Diplomatic Guild, Long-Last Station."

Oblong, suspended in a cradle of invisible force, the machine looked nothing like her namesake, my most recent demi-wife on Long-Last. But, as it was imprinted with her voice and twenty of her personality engrams, this was a device one had to think of as possessing gender, and even a minimal right to courtesy. "Thank you," I told the auto-sec. "I'll be right up."

Assuming dismissal, Betty turned and departed. From the corner of the suite, the Crotonite lifted his head and watched the machine briefly. Something in those catlike eyes seemed to track it as a hunter might follow prey. But this Crot wasn't ever again going to be chasing flitting airborne victims above the forests of any thick-aired world. Where once he had carried great, tentlike wings, powerfully muscled and heavier than his torso, now the short, slender, deep-chested being wore mere nubs — scarred from recent ampuration.

The Crotonite noticed my look and snarled fiercely. "Plant-eating grub! Turn away your half-blind, squinty vision-orbs. You have no status entitling you to cast them on my shame!"

That was in Crotonoi, of course. Few Erthuma would have been able to understand so rapid and slurred an alien diatribe. But my talents and training had won me this post.

Cursed talents. Double-cursed training!

By my own species's standards of politeness I'd have accepted the rebuke and turned away, respecting his privacy. Instead, I snapped right back at him in my own language.

"You dare throw insults at me? You who are broken and wingless and shall never again fly? You who shame your race by neglecting the purpose for

which you were cast down? Here, try doing this!"

I flexed my strong legs and bounded high in the half-gravity of the Visitor Suite. The cripple, of course, could not manage anywhere near that height with his puny legs. I landed facing him. "You're a diplomat, Jirata, You you your fallen state by being better than your peers, the first so chosen for a bold new experiment. Your job is now to try something new to your folk . . . to empathize with ground-walking life forms like me, and even swimming forms like Phss' ash. To make that effort, you were assigned to me, a burden

I did not ask for, nor welcome. Nor do I predict success.

"Still, you can try. It's the purpose of your existence. The reason your people didn't leave you beneath some tree to starve, and instead still speak your name to the winds, as if you were alive.

"Try, Jirata. Just try, and the least you'll win is that I, personally, will stop being cruel to you."

The Crotonite looked away, but I could tell he was struggling with a deep perplexity. "Why should you stop being cruel?" he asked. "You have every advantage,"

I sighed. This was going to take a long time. "Because I'd rather like you than hate you, Jirata. And if you don't understand that, consider this. Your job is to investigate a new mode of diplomacy for your people. Empathy is what you must discover to succeed. So while I'm away, why not converse with Phs'aah. I'm sure he'll be patient with you. He doesn't know how to be anything else."

That was untrue of course. Phss'aah gave me a look of exasperation at this unwelcome assignment. For his part, Jirata glanced at the Cephallon, floating in all that water, and let out a keening of sheer disgust.

I left the room.

"Actually, there are two messages of Red Priority," Captain Smeet told me. She handed over a pair of decoded flimsies. I thanked her, went over into the privacy corner of the ship's bridge, and laid the first of the shimmering, eazy message films over my head.

Immediately, the gossamer fabric wrapped my face, covering eyes and ears, leaving only my nostrils free. It began vibrating, and after a momentary blurriness, sight and sound enveloped me.

My boss looked across his desk...the slave driver wfiose faith in my abilities was anything but reassuring. He seemed to feel there was no end to the number of tasks I could take on at the same time.

"Patty," he said. "Sorry about dumping the Crotonite envoy on you. As I told you earlier, he's part of a new experimental program being initiated by the Seven Soverienjers' League. You'll recall that a particular Crotonite confederacy suffered rather badly because it so magnificently bungled the negotiations at Maioplar fifty years ago. In desperation, the Crotonites are trying something radical, to revise completely their way of dealing with other races. I guess they're experimenting on us Eirhuma first because we're the least influential of the Six, and if it flops, our opinion won't matter much anyway.

"In answer to your last message — I still have no idea if the Seven Sovereigns' League has cleared this experiment with other Crotonite nation-states, or if they've doing it completely on thier own. Crot intra-race politics is such a tangle, who can tell? That's why the Erthuma Diplomacy Guild decided to farm out Jirata and the others like him to our roving emissaries. You can try to figure out what's yoing on away from the spothish of ... well, media and the like I'm sure you understand."

"Riiight, Maxwell." I gave a very un-ladylike snort. Back on Long-Last, Betty used to chastise me for that. But I never heard any of our husbands complain.

"That's my Patty," he went on, as if he was sure my reaction would be complete enthusiasm. "Who knows, maybe the League's idea of using crippled bats as erwoys may make just that bit of difference, so let's put it on high priority. okay?"

"As high as preventing a break in the Essential Protocols?" I muttered. But I knew the answer.

"Of course, nothing is to stand in the way of getting King Zardee to toe the line on replicants. If he gives you any trouble about that, you just tell that freonblooded son of a b—"

I'd heard enough. "Goodbye, Maxwell," I said, and ripped the flimsy off. It instantly began dissolving into inert gas.

"Orders, madam?" Always the professional, Captain Smeet looked at me coolly, expectantly.

"Proceed to Planet Nine of this system, and please beam to King Zardee that I'll wait no longer for him to prepare for my arrival and inspection. If he plans to shoot us out of the sky, let him do so and live with the consequences."

Smeet only nodded and turned to tell her bridge crew what to do. I could have asked her to take me wet-diving in the nearby sun of the Prongee System, and she'd have found a way to do it, keeping her opinion of crazy diplomats to herself. That was more than I sometimes was able to do, after listening to Maxwell for a while.

Why success followed that awful old man around so, I could never understand.

An angry visage greeted me, glaring out of the communications tank. In had been sent on this mission because, among all the different styles of government used by various Erthumoi nation-worlds, kingdoms were among the quirklest, and I had the most experience in our sector dealing with the arrogant creatures known as kings.

Some kings were smooth. But this one actually reminded me of Jirata as he growled. "We are not accustomed to being made to wait?" he said as I stepped into the Communications Lounge. Ignoring the remark, I curtised in the manner customary for women in his commonwealth.

"Your Majesty would not have liked to see me dressed as I was when you called. It took a few moments to make myself presentable."

Zardee grunted. I felt his eyes survey me like a piece of real estate, and recognized covetousness in them. I always found it amazing how many Erthumoi societies left their males with these unaltered ancient, visually stimulated lust patterns. And Zardee was nearly eight hundred standard years old!

Never mind. I'd use whatever chinks in his armor I could find.

"I accept your apology," he said in a softer tone. "And I must offer my regrets in turn for keeping such a comely and accomplished lady waiting out at the boundary, as I have. I now invite you to join me on my yacht for some refreshment and entertainment I'm sure you'il find unique and distracting."

"You are most gracious, Your Majesty. However, first I must complete my task here and inspect your mining establishment on the ninth planet of this

system."

His visage transformed once more to anger, and again I felt astonishment that this system's folk put up with such a monarch. The attractions of kingships are well documented, but sentimentality can become an illness if it isn't looked to.

"There's nothing on my mining world of interest to the Diplomacy Guild!" he snapped. "You have no authority to force yourself upon me!"

This from a fellow so atavistic I had no doubt he would chain me to a bed in his seraglio, were it within his power. I kept my amusement to myself. "Tm sure, Your Majesty, that you wouldn't want it to get out among your Erthumoi and Nexian neighbors that you have something to hide—"

"All kingdoms and sovereign worlds have secrets, foolish woman. I have a right to keep vital security information from the prying eyes of outsiders."

I nodded. "But not when those secrets violate the Essential Protocols of the Erthuma. Or is it your intention to join the Outlaw Worlds, foregoing the services of my Guild?"

For a moment it looked as if he might declare just such intentions. But he stopped. No doubt he realized that step might push his people too far. Commercial repercussions would be catastrophic.

"The Essential Protocols don't cover very much," he said, slowly. "My subjects have access to Erthumoi ombudsmen. I vet my treaties past Guild lawyers, and my ship captains report to the Guild on activities observed among the Other Five races. That is all that's required of me."

"You are forgetting Article Six of the Protocols," I said.

Blinking, Zardee spoke slowly. "Exactly what is it you accuse me of, Ambassador."

1 shrugged. "Such a strong word... I'm certainly not accusing you of any-

I shrugged. "Such a strong word... I'm certainly not accusing you of anything. But there are rumors, Your Majesty. Rumors that someone is violating the article forbidding the creation of fully autonomous replicants."

His face reddened three shades. I did not need a Nexian's insight or Cephallon's empathy to tell I'd struck home. At the same time, though, this was not guilt I read in the monarch's eyes, but rather something akin to shame. I found his reaction most interesting.

"I'll rendezvous with your ship above the ninth planet," he said tersely, and cut the channel. No doubt Captain Smeet and the king's captain were already exchanging coordinates by the time I departed the lounge and

headed for the Visitor Suite, to see how things were progressing there.

I shouldn't have expected miracles from Phss'aah, After all, Iirata the Crotonite was my responsibility, not his. But I might have hoped at least for tact from a Cephallon diplomat. Instead, I returned to find Phss'aah carrying on a long monologue directed at the crippled Crotonite, who huddled in his corner, glaring back at the creature in the tank. And if looks could maim, there wouldn't have been much of anything left but bloody water.

"... so unlike the other Starfaring Races, we Cephallons find this human innovation of articulate, intelligent machines useful and fascinating, even if it is also puzzling and bizarre. Take your own case, Jirata, Would not a loval mechanical surrogate be of use to one such as you, especially in your present condition? Helping you fend for -"

Phss'aah noticed my return and interrupted his monologue. "Ah, Patty. You have returned. I was just explaining to our comrade here how useful it is to have machines able to anticipate your requirements, and of repairing and maintaining themselves. Even the Crotonites' marvelous, intricate devices, handmade and unique, lack that capability."

"We do not need it!" Jirata spat. "A machine should be elegant, light, compact, efficient. It should be a thing of beauty and craftsmanship! Pah! What pride can a human have in such a monster as a robot? Why, I hear they even allow the things to design and build more robots, which build still others! What can come about when an engineer lets his creation pass beyond personal control?"

I felt an eerie chill. Glad as I was that Jirata seemed, in his own style, to be emerging from his funk, I didn't like the direction this conversation was headed.

"What about that, Patty?" Phss'aah asked, turning to face me. "I have consulted much Erthumoi literature having to do with man-created machine intelligence, and there runs through much of it a thread of warning. Philosophers speak of the very fear Jirata expressed . . . calling it the 'Frankenstein Syndrome.' I do not know the origins of that term, but it has an apt sound for dread of destruction at the hands of one's own creations."

I nodded, "Fortunately, we Erthuma have a tradition of liking to frighten ourselves with scary stories, then finding ways to avoid the very scenario described. It's called warning fiction, and historians now credit that art form with our species's survival across the bomb-to-starship crisis time."

"Most interesting. But tell me please, how did you come to choose a way to keep control over your creations? The Locrians certainly have trouble whenever a clutch of male eggs is neglectfully laid outside the careful management of professional brooders, and the Samians have their own problems

with gene-bred animals. How do you manage your robots then?" How indeed? I wondered at the way this discussion had, apparently naturally, just happened upon a topic so deadly and coincidentally apropos to my

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other concerns.

"Well, one approach is to have the machines programmed with deeply coded fundamental operating rules, or robotic laws, that they cannot disobey without causing paralysis. This method serves well as a first line of defense, especially for simple machines.

"Unfortunately, it proved tragically inadequate at times when the machines' growing intelligence enabled them to interpret those laws in new, rather distressing ways. Lawyer programs can be terribly tricky, we found. Today, unleashing a new one without proper checks is punishable by death."

"I understand. We Cephallons reserve that punishment for the lawyers themselves. I'll remember to advise my Council about this, if we decide to

buy more of your high-end robots. Do continue."

"Well, one experimental approach, with the very brightest machines, has been to actually raise them as if they were Erthumoi children. In one of our confederations there are several thousand robots that have been granted provisional status as junior citizens —"

"Obscenity!" Jirata interrupted with a shout.

I merely shrugged. "It's an experiment. The idea is that we'll have little to fear from super-smart robots if they think of themselves as fellow Erthuma who just happen to be built differently. Thus the hope is that they'll be as loyal as our grandchildren and, like our grandchildren, pose no threat even if they grows smarter than us."

"Fascinating!" the Cephallon cried. "But then, what happens when...?"
Point after point, he spun out the logical chain. I was drawn into
Phas'aah's intellectual enthusiasm. This was one of the reasons I entered the
Diplomacy Guild, after all . . . in order to see old things in entirely new

light, through alien eyes, as if for the first time.

In his corner, I sensed even Jirata paying attention, almost in spite of himself. I had never before seen a Crotonite willing to sit and listen for so long. Perhaps this cruel and desperate experiment of theirs might actually bear fruit?

Then Jirata exploded with another set of disdainful curses, deriding one of Phss'aah's extrapolations. And I knew that, even if the experiment worked, it was going to be a long struggle.

Meanwhile, I felt the minutes flicker by, counting down to my encounter with Zardee.

Even with hyperdrive it's next to impossible to run anything like an "empire," in the ancient sense of the word. Not across starlanes as wast as the galaxy. Left to their own devices, the scattered colony worlds — daughters of faraway Earth — would probably have all gone their own way long ago... each choosing its own path, conservative or outlandish, into a destiny all its own. Without opposition, we humans do tend to fraction our lovalities.

But there was opposition of sorts when we emerged into space. The Other

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Five were already there. Strange, barely knowable creatures with technologies at first quite a bit ahead of ours. In playing a furious game of catch-up, the Erthumoi worlds nearly all agreed to a pact . . . a loose confederation bound together by a civil service. Foremost of these is the Diplomacy Guild.

And foremost among the rules agreed to by all signatories to the Essential Protocols is this: not to undertake any unilateral actions that might unite other starfaring cultures against Erthuma. In my lifetime, four crises have loomed that caused strife over this provision — in which some community of Earthdescent was found to be engaged in dangerous or inciteful activities. Once, a small trade alliance of Erthumoi worlds almost provoked a Locrian queendom to the point of violence. Each time, the episode was soothed over by the Guild, but on two of those occasions it took severe threats - arraying all of the offending community's Erthumoi neighbors in a united show of intimidation - before the reckless ones backed down.

Now I feared this was about to happen again. And this time, the conditions for quick and simple solution weren't encouraging. Zardee's system lay nearby a cluster of stars very rich in material resources, heavy elements given off by a spate of supernovas a few million years ago. Asteroids abundant in every desirable mineral were plentiful there.

Now normally, this wouldn't matter much. The galaxy is not resource poor. We are not living in Earth's desperate twenty-first century, after all. But what if one of the Six embarked on a population binge? Still fresh

among we Erthuma is memory of such a calamity. Earth's frail ecosystem is still recovering from the stress laid on her before we grew up and moved away to give our ancient mother a rest.

Of course, the galaxy is vast beyond all planetary measure. Still, it doesn't take much computer time to extrapolate what could happen if any of the Six Starfarers decided to have fun making babies fast. Take our own species as an example. At human breeding rates typical of pre-spacefaring Earth, and given the efficiency of hyperdrive to speed colonization, we could fill every Earthlike world in the galaxy within a million years. Among the catastrophic consequences of such a hasty, uncontrolled expansion would be the destruction of life forms already in existence on those worlds.

And then, of course, our descendants would run out of Earthlike planets. What then? Might they not chafe at the limitations on terraforming . . . the agreement among the Six only to convert dead worlds, never worlds already bearing life?

Consider the fundamental reason why there has never been a major war among the Six. It's their incompatibility, the fact that the worlds one covets are respectively unpleasant or deadly to the other five, that maintains the peace. But what if overpopulation started us imagining we could get away with turning a high CO₂ world into an oxy-rich planet, say? How would the Locrians react to that?

The same logic applied to the Other Five, each capable of its own popula-

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tion burst. Only their irascible temperaments and short life spans keep the Cortonites from overbreeding, for instance. And the Locrians, first of the Six upon the spacelanes, admitted once in rare candor that the urge to spew forth a myriad of eggs is still powerful within them, constrained only by social and reliaious pressures.

The problem is this: what seems at first to be a stable situation is anything but stable. If the Locrians seem ancient from our Erthumoi perspective, by the clock of the stars they are nearly as recent as we. Three hundred thousand years is a mere eye blink. The coincidence of all Six appearing virtually at the same time is one that has Erthumoi and Cephallon and Nexian scholars completely puzzled.

Yes, we're all at peace now. But computer simulations show utter calamity if any race looks about to take off on a population binge. And despite the Erthumoi monpoly on self-aware machines, all of the Six do have computers.

As my ship docked with the resplendent yacht of the King of Prongee, I looked off in the direction of the Gorch Cluster, with its rainbow of bright, metal-rich stars, and its promise of riches beyond what anyone alive might

Beyond present needs, yes. But perhaps not beyond what any one man might want.

Captain Smeet signaled the locks would be open in a few minutes. I took advantage of that interval to use a viewer and check in on my guests.

advantage of that interval to use a viewer and check in on my guests.

Within his tank, Phss'aah was getting another rubdown from his personal robot valet. Meanwhile, the Cephallon continued an apparent monologue.

"... how mystics of several races explain the sudden and simultaneous appearance of starfarers in the galaxy. After all, is it not puzzling that awkward creatures such as we water-dwellers, or the Samians, took to the stars, when so many skilled, mechanically minded races, such as the Lenglils and Fortts, never even thought of it, and rejected spaceflight when it was offered them?"

From his corner of the room, Jirata flapped his wing nubs as if dismissing an unpleasant thought. "It is obscene that any but those who personally fly should ever have achieved the heights."

I felt pleased. By Crotonite standards, Jirata was being positively outgoing and friendly. Like a good Cephallon diplomat, Phss'aah seemed not to notice the insults.

Captain Smeet signaled, and I shut off the viewer reluctantly. There were times when, irritating as he was, Phss'ash could be fascinating to listen to. Now though, I had business to discuss, and no lesser matter, possibly, than the long-term survival of the Erthuma.

"My industrial robots are mining devices, pure and simple. They threaten no one. Not anyone!"

I watched the activity on the surface of the ninth planet. Although it was

an airless body, crater-strewn and wracked by ancient lava seams, it seemed at first that I was looking down on the veldt of some prairie world, covered from horizon to horizon with roaming herds of ungulates. Though these ruminants were not living creatures, they moved as if they were. I even saw "mothers" pause in their erazine to "murse" their "offsorine."

Of course, what they were grazing on was the dusty, metal-rich surface soil of the planet. Across their broad backs, solar collectors powered the conversion of those raw materials into refined parts. Within each of these browsing cows there grew a tiny duplicate of itself, which the artificial beasts then gave birth to, and then fed still more refined materials straight through to adulthood.

There was nothing particularly unusual about this scene so far. Back before we Erthuma achieved starflight, it was machines such as these that changed our destiny, from paupers on a half-ruined world, short of resources, to beings wealthy enough to demand a place among the Other Five.

An ancient mathematician named John von Neumamn had predicted the eventuality of robots able to make copies of themselves. When such creatures were let loose on the Earth's moon, within a few years they had multiplied into the millions. Then, half of them had been reprogrammed to make consumer goods instead — and suddenly our wealth was, compared to what it had been, as twentieth-century man had been to the Neanderthal.

But in every new thing there are always dangers. We found this out when some of the machines *refused* their new programming and even began evading the harvesters.

"I see no hound mechanisms," I told King Zardee. "You have no mutantdetecting dog-bots patrolling the herds? Searching for mutants?"

He shrugged. "A useless, needless expense. We're in a part of the galaxy low in cosmic rays, and our design is well shielded. I've shown you the statistics. Our new replicants demonstrate breakthroughs in both efficiency and stability."

I shook my head, unimpressed. Figures were one thing. Galactic survival was another matter entirely.

"Please show me how the mechanisms are fitted with their enabling and remote shutdown keys, Your Majesty. I don't see any robo-cowboys at work. How and when are the calves converted into adults? Are they called in to a central point?"

"It happens right out on the range," Zardee said proudly. "I see no reason to force every calf to go to a factory in order to get its keys. We program each cow to manufacture its calf's keys on the spot."

Madness! I balled my hands into fists in order to keep my diplomat's reserve. The idiot!

With deliberate calmness I faced him. "Your Majesty, that makes the keys completely meaningless. Their original and entire *purpose* is to make sure than no Von Neumann replicant device ever reaches maturity without com-

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ing to an Erthumoi-run facility for inspection. It's our ultimate guarantee the machines remain under our control, and that their numbers do not explode."

Zardee laughed. "Twe heard it before, this fear of fairy tales. My dear beautiful young woman, surely you don't take seriously those Frankenstein stories in the pulp flimsies, about replicants running away and devouring planets? Entire solar systems?" He guffawed.

I shrugged. "It does not matter how likely or unlikely such scenarios are. What matters is how the prospect appears to the Other Five. For twelve centuries we've downplayed this potential outcome of automation because our best alienists think the Others would find it appalling. It's the reason replicant restrictions are written into the Protocols. Your Majestey."

I gestured at the massed herds down below. "What you've done here is utterly irresponsible —"

I stopped because Zardee was smiling.

"You fear a chimera, dear diplomat. For I've already proven you have nothing to worry about in regards to alien opinion."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've *already* shown these devices to representatives of many Locrian, Samian, and Nexian communities, several of whom have already taken delivery of breeding stock."

My mouth opened and closed. "But . . . but what if they equip the machines with space-transport ability? You —"

Zardee blinked. "What are you talking about? Of course the models I provided are space-adapted. Their purpose is to be asteroid-mining devices, after all. It's a breakthrough! Not only do they reproduce rapidly and efficiently, but they also transport themselves wherever the customer sets his beacon..."

I did not stay to listen to the rest. Filled with anger and despair, I turned away and left him to stammer into silence behind me. I had calls to make, without delay.

Maxwell took the news well, all considered.

"Tve already traced three of the contracts," he told me by hyperwave.
"We've managed to get the Nexians to agree to a delay, long enough for us to
lean on Zardee and alter the replicants' key system. The Nexians didn't understand why we were so concerned, though they could tell we were worried. Clearly, they haven't thought out the implications yet, and we're
naturally reluctant to clue them in.

"The other contracts are going to be much harder. Two went to small Locrian queendoms. One to a Samian solidity, and one to a Cephallon super-pod. I'm putting prime operatives onto each, but I'm afraid it's likely the replicants will go through at least five generations before we accomplish anything. By then it will probably be too late."

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"You mean by then some will have mutated and escaped customer control?" I asked.

He shook his head. "According to Zardee's data, it should take longer than that to happen. No, but then I'm afraid our projections show each of the customers will be getting a handsome profit from his investment. The replicants will become essential to them, and impossible for us to regain control over."

"So what do you want me to do?"

Maxwell sighed. "You stay by Zardee. I'll have a sealed alliance of his Erthumoi neighbors for you by tomorrow, to get him deposed if he won't cooperate. Problem is, the cat's already out of the bag."

I, too, had studied ancient Earth expressions during one of my lives. "Well, I'll close the barn door, anyway."

Maxwell did not bother with a salutation. He signed off more weary-looking than I'd ever seen him. And our labors were only just beginning.

The Cephallon and the Crotonite weren't exactly making love when I returned to the Visitor Suite. (What an image!) Still, they hadn't murdered each other either.

Jirata had become animated enough to attend to the internal environments controller in his corner of the chamber. He had dismantled the wall panel and was experimenting — creating a partition, then a bed-pallet, then an excretorium. Immersed in mechanical arts, his batlike face almost took on a look of serenity as he customized the machinery, converting the insensitively mass-produced into something individualized with character and uniqueness.

It was a rare epiphany, watching him so and coming to realize that even so venal and disgusting a race as his could cause me wonder.

Oh, no doubt I was oversimplifying. Perhaps it was the replicant crisis that had me primed to feel this way. Ironically, though they were the premier mechanics among the Six, the Crotonites' technical and scientific level was not particularly high. And they would be among the *last* ever to understand what a Von Neumann machine was about. From their point of view, autonomy and self-replication were for Crotonites, and in anyone or anything else they were obscenities.

I wondered if this experiment, which had caused a noble and high-caste creature of his community to be cast down so in a desperate attempt to learn new ways, would ever meet any degree of success. What would be the analogy for a person like me . . . to be surgically grafted crude gills instead of lungs, and dwell forever underwater, less mobile than a Cephallon? Would I, could I, ever volunteer for so drastic an exile, even if my homeworld depended on it?

Yes, I conceded, watching Jirata work. There was nobility here, of a sort.

And at least the Crotonites had not unleashed upon the galaxy a thing that

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could threaten all Six spacefarers . . . and the million other intelligent life forms without starships.

Phss'aah awakened from a snooze at the pool's surface and descended to face me. But it was his robot that spoke.

"Patty, my master hopes your business in this system has been successfully concluded."

"Alas, no. Crises develop lives of their own. Soon, however, I expect permission to confide this matter in him. When that happens, I hope to benefit from his insight."

Phss'aah acknowledged the compliment with a bare nod. Then he spoke for himself. "You must not despair, my young Erthumoi colleague. Look, after all, to your other accomplishments. I have decided, for instance, to go ahead and purchase a sample order of thirty thousand of these delightful machines for my own community. And if they work out there, perhaps others in the Cephallon Supreme Pod will buy. Is this not a coup to make you happy?"

For a moment I could not answer. What could I say to Phss'aah? That soon robots such as these might be so cheap that they could be had for a song? That soon a flood of wealth would sweep the galaxy, so great that no creature of any starfaring race would ever want for material goods?

Or should I tell him that the seeds strewn to grow this cornucopia were doomed to mutate, to change, to seek paths of their own . . . paths down which no foreseeing could follow?

"That's nice," I finally said. "I'm glad you like our machines. You can have as many as you need."

And I tried to smile. "You can have as many as you want."

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VOICE IN THE DESERT by Judith Tarr

by Judith Tarr art: Jean Elizabeth Martin



Judith Tarr was born and raised in Maine. She has taught Latin in Maine and at Yale University. She has also presented and continues to present workshops in the writing and marketing of science fiction and Jantasy at such venues as Mount Holyoke College and Princeton University.

Her published works include A Fall of Princes (1988) and A Wind in Cairo (1989).

"Voice in the Desert" is an adaptation of the tenth-century Latin play, "The Fall and Conversion of Maria, Niece of Hermit Abraham," of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim. I lie on stone.

The stone is hard — glory be to God.

The stone is cold — glory be to God.

If I lie full-stretched, my house is but little longer than I. I turn my head; the moon is bright beyond my door. The bare sands stretch away into the dark. I am the farthest out, the youngest and, think they who lie about me, the most holy.

Prov. saints

Poor saints.

I was very young when I came here. I cried when I saw it. It was bright daylight then and the sun was cruel, and I had no one in the world to love me; and they had brought me to this place. A village, a straggle of stone huts in a bleak and barren desert, with a single feeble spring for all its people. And such people. Beggars, they seemed, men and a few women in rags that stank to high heaven, unshaven and unshorn, so withered and dried by the sun that not a one seemed less than ancient. There were no children. I was the only one.

I remembered my mother and my father and the wide cool house in the city by the river; the servants to grant my every whim, and the garden with its pond full of golden fish, and the room in which I slept, full of sweet serus and soft voices.

It was all gone. All withered and dead. Strangers came and took me away and brought me into the desert. Those were not beggars, they said, thinking rebuke at me, and agreement which they did not know I caught. These were holy people, desert saints who had laid the world aside with all its fleshly pleasures and turned themselves wholly to God. And this was my uncle, holy Father Abraham, oldest and most malodorous of all, looking at me in gentle dismay and wondering what under heaven he was to do with a child.

I terrified him. And knowing that, I lost my own fear. I smiled. He melted as they always did, even saints.

Maria, he named me, for the Queen of Heaven — with many words on the honor and the blessedness of the name, which I hardly understood. I soon forgot that I had ever had another name. Grief faded more slowly. They tried to soften their life for me, all the holy hermits; in their own way they loved me. Little by little I learned to accept my lot. It was the highest and most holy of any, my uncle told me in his quiet rambling way, and I was blessed above all mortals to come to it so early, before ever I learned the wiles of the world.

He believed what he taught me, and I trusted him. I began to forget that the green and growing world had ever been.

I was always different from the others. In the city I learned very young to

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hide it, that I knew what people thought and felt without their speaking of it; that I could see what was not there and hear what no one else could hear. Animals spoke to me; birds sang - not words, but songs I understood.

In the desert I kept my secret out of habit. But saints too are not like anyone else. They guessed that I was different. Indeed, they said, I was blessed of God. That art of prayer which came so hard to them, the purity of union with the Infinite, the raising up to heaven in a blaze of sudden light, came to me as easily as breathing, as if I had been born for it.

I grew proud. I did penance, but my pride only feigned defeat. How could I be humble? Even as he punished me, my saintly uncle rejoiced in his heart that I was shaped so perfectly for heaven.

Each of the hermits had his own hut, built with his own hands. Mine, they had all helped me to build, close beside Father Abraham's where he could hear my voice lifted in prayer, or, peering out of his narrow doorway, glimpse me at my devotions.

My house when I began was more than large enough for me. But I grew to fit it. How strange it was to grow and change, to be young as no other was. My skin was smooth and whiter than the bread of the Eucharist, and would endure no touch of the sun; nor, in his tenderness of heart, would my uncle ever give me such a penance, that I should sear my body in that relentless glare. I prayed, and in my ecstasy of communion I learned to shield myself until I could walk abroad without harm. A miracle, said Father Abraham, certain sign of God's blessing.

There is prayer, and there is prayer. There is the prayer of words, in which we may all share — mass and psalms and common devotions — or which one of us may offer up alone, aloud or in silence. There is prayer of deeds, which is to help with the building of a new house or to tend the sick or to bake bread for us all. And there is pure prayer, which is beyond describing.

At night when the saints slept, I would lie awake, thinking of nothing, with my mind full of light. All the world seemed folded in my hands: the dreaming murmur of men, the dim wild thoughts of beasts, and beneath them all, the green-dark voice of the earth which bore them. We were one, they and I, in the mind of God.

It was a night like this one. Cool to coldness as desert nights are, with a great orb of moon and the stars singing in the vault of heaven. I lay on my bed of stone in my gown of sackcloth and my armor of holy filth, all one with the world and its Deity.

There were two.

My soul flicked itself like a horse's hide vexed by a fly. The strangeness clung. It was not man or beast, earth, star, or God. It was not myself. Yet it was very like myself.

I took refuge in my body, bolt upright upon its bed, shivering with a cold that was all of the mind. I began to pray as loudly as I could, the first psalm that came to my head. "'Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men, preserve me from —'"

Evil?

That was not my thought. I crossed myself. "Retro me, Sathanas!" I cried, exactly as Sister Anastasia cried every night when her body warred against her soul's rising up to heaven.

But, said the stranger with a touch of dismay and a touch of amusement, why should I get behind you? I'm neither the Devil nor his minion.

And indeed, I saw as I began to grow calmer, there was no taint of corruption in — him? Yes; it felt like a man.

And you like a woman.

Which, of course, I was. I told him so. And who — and what — was he? Amusement; sadness; a little diffidence. You can call me Gabriel. As for what I am — what, lady, are you?

No lady, I answered him. Only Maria.

A great and noble name.

So my uncle was always telling me; and that I should do my utmost to be worthy of it. Was Gabriel then an angel? I asked, half in hope, half in dread.

He laughed. His voice was coming clear to me, a sweet dark voice, not at all as I had imagined an angel's would be. And truly, I'm far from being one, he said. I'm quite corporeal, if not quite as other men. And you?

Very much in the flesh, if able to leave it at will.

So can I.

A saint? A holy hermit? A priest, rapt in prayer, able at this blessed moment to touch my open soul?

Again he laughed. Oh, no! I was just dropping off to sleep.

But he must have been a holy man. Only holy men, my uncle said, could do as we did, and then only the very holiest of them.

Newer. Devout enough, all things considered, but no one will ever miscall me by the name of saint. He let me know that he was lying on a bed in an inn, with men snoring all about him and the tumult of a city beyond the walls. More, he had earned the bed with a song and his supper with another, and the hard shape against his side was a lute, very old and very difficult to please, but willing enough to yield to his mastery.

I saw him then, lying on his side, one arm crooked beneath his head. He was slender and young, dark of hair but light of eye. Almost golden, they were, meeting mine as our minds met, wide with wonder.

But, we said, you're like me!

And, we said, you are beautiful.

Terror seized me; stark, holy terror. I fled from him, cast up all my walls against him, drowned him out with a flood of prayer. After an eternal while, I knew that he was gone. I was safe. I had escaped him.

Night again. The moon rose later than before. I could not make myself sleep.

Maria?

No inn tonight. A barn full of cattle; a stomach full of cheese and bread and bad wine; and the lute by his side. I shut him out.

I dreaded the nights. I wanted to confess this dream-temptation, but Father Abraham had shut himself up with God in a fire of visions. There was no one else whom I could face with it.

Sleep would not come. Prayer brought the interloper.

Why are you afraid of me? I'm leagues away. I can't harm you.

He was in my mind. He was a man. He was -

Lonely, so lonely, and at last, someone like me, who knows what I am and what I feel and what I yearn for. I thought holy hermits were all withered, sour old men and hideous crones. Who condemned you to such a life?

He was a devil, sent to tempt me to my damnation. To lure me away; to

To make me think.

The tales he could tell, when I would let him, or at the very least, when I did not hinder him. He knew songs from every land he had ever been in, and those were many; and from some he had never known but hoped one day to

I dreaded the nights. But I had begun to live for them.

Maria.

Gabriel.

I know where you are.

Had he not always?

Souls are different. I'm very close to your body now. Maria . . . His voice softened. Maria, may I come? Only — only to look at you?

People always came. Pilgrims, of a sort, pious idlers who came to stare at the saints, and went back home and boasted of it to others either less sanctified or less curious. I was never allowed to approach them too closely. I was pure, entirely unstained by the world; no one would risk marring that perfect innocence. So little my good teachers knew.

Only to look, he said. Only that. And then to go away again, back to these nights and these tales and this communion. I'm so close — I can't bear not to see, not to hear — Maria!

He tried to lie to himself, but I had walked unnoticed in his dreams. My life was a horror to him, who so loved the world and everything in it. I had seen him as he saw himself, riding up to my cell — a den of hideous squalor like a sty about a pearl — and snatching me away, like a prince in one of his stories. I looked like an angel there, clothed in white, with hair like a fall of

I gathered the tangle of it into my hand, made a light with a thought, stared at it. Gold? No. Dusty straw. He lived in songs; he had made me into one. But oh, to go away and see the places he told me of, and live — truly and joyously live.

Yes, he had corrupted me. And now that it was done, I hardly knew that I had changed.

They say that he came at night, creeping through my window, concealing his demon-shape with a monk's habit. So do people spin their tales, saints though they may be. He came by night indeed, for secree, but as for climbing in my window — stender he certainly was, lithe as a dancer, but even a cat would have been hard put to slip through the niggardly slit which let in the light.

I resolved to conceal myself from him. Even as I formed my resolution, when the sun had sunk beneath the barren mountains and the stars begun to burn, I went to the spring—to drink, I told myself. And I committed a sin. I washed myself all over, over and over, garment, body, matted hair. I stood in the first rays of the moon, I gathered them into a lamp, and I looked down into the pool. My hair was gold, all gold, and my eyes were the color of smoke, my skin like whitest ivory. I was beautiful.

I fled to my cell and tried to pray. My soul flew up, but not to heaven. It found him on the road, walking with his steady wanderer's stride, robed and hooded against the cool of the night. Yet not as a monk, for what monk ever went garbed in saffron-gold, with gold on his arms and in his ears, and a lute on his back? He sang as he walked, pilgrims' songs, and ever and again an Ave Maria. Nor was it to the Blessed Virgin that he sang it.

I hid my mind from him. And yet he found me. He stood in the doorway of my cell, shining in his own pale-gold light, and held out his hand. My soul sough him even when most I dreaded him; my body came by no will of mine. He was just a little taller than I, and his eves were sun-gold.

"Maria," he said. Only my name.

It cast a spell on both of us. He led me out under the singing stars, still face to face and eye to dazzled eye.

"Gabriel," I said.

He smiled and laid his hand upon my cheek. The moon poured over us like water.

Come, we said. Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come.

"Come," he said to me.

His eyes opened wide. There was no pain, only surprise. A third eye had opened in his forehead, a sharp stony eye rimmed with shattered bone.

opened in his forehead, a sharp stony eye rimmed with shattered bone.

They stood in a ragged circle, the desert saints, in every hand a stone and
in every mind a horror of the demon lover.

He was as heavy as earth, as heavy as lead, who had been all light and

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laughter. His cloak of moonlight thinned and faded and blew away, like mist in the hitter morning

My soul was darkness. I hated, who had never known the word; beyond even cursing I hated them, all of them, holy murderers who slew my newfound love. I left his body where he had abandoned it, and my God with him, and all His gaping saints.

П

The sun set, the sun I hated, yielding to the night wherein I was queen. So they told me, all my lovers. They were liars, most of them, scoundrels. blackest sinners. But they never lied in this, that I was beautiful. They came like pilgrims to worship at the shrine of my beauty, and I adorned it with all the riches they had brought for me. Silk, that night, silk the color of a peacock's breast, embroidered with gold. Gold too on my arms, and iewels in my ears and woven into my hair, and all about me the sweet scents of Arabia.

Mine host — for employer he chose not to call himself — scratched softly at my door. He had a serpent's mind, cold and dark and subtle, and a round, ruddy, jovial face, and a smile which any man would trust and any woman yield to. It was very broad tonight. "How lovely, how ravishing, how per-fectly exquisite you are, my sweet lady! All the world bows low before your beauty. Not young men only, and men in their prime whose powers are equal to your delights, but even the ancients come now to worship you."

"I give my love to all who come," I said, "nor deny it to any,"

"To any, that is, who can pay,"

I smiled; and he, even he, sighed once, enchanted.

Old indeed, this one, a very ancient, dried almost to dust, proclaiming in a voice both loud and strong that he had heard even in his distant country of the fair Maria; that the simple rumor of her had roused his love and brought him to our city.

"And here," I said, "am I. Am I worthy of your love?"
I kept my mind from his in distaste for what I knew would be there. Wonder at my beauty; joy in its possession; and through it all, the naked lust. So it was with all of them. Even that withered age had yet a green root: he would have naught else but that we go up at once to my chamber. They all laughed at his eagerness; he smiled a thin smile, surprisingly sweet. I took his hand and led him to the stair.

The meal was laid, the best of everything; the bed freshly made and strewn with petals. He trembled so with anticipation that he could not eat, nor would he touch the wine, fine though it was and poured by my own hand. Why, thought I, he is as fearful as any raw youth. I set myself to calm him in ways no other could.

"Maria," he said. I smiled into his eyes. His hands closed over mine. He was strong; almost he hurt me. I kept my smile. "Maria," he said again. "Maria, don't you know me?"

Some liked to test me so. Youths, most of them. I had not thought that an old man would be so foolish. To please him, I looked hard at him, seeing nothing I should know. He was not unbearable, for one so far gone in mortality. His lined face was shaven smooth, his dark eyes burning in it; his body, though pared to the bone by the passing years, was freshly washed and scented, it seemed, with roses.

"I know that you have come to love me," I said, caressing him. "Come then, be my beloved. See; the bed is ready, my arts prepared for you. Will you not come with me?"

To my amazement he began to weep, great, easy, old man's tears. "Maria, child, poor lost lamb. Don't you know your uncle Abraham?"

The world reeled. My body must have followed it; he was holding me, flooding me with love and fear, and with compassion that made me cry aloud in agony. They had killed him, my soul, my beloved, my Gabriel; they had killed him and called him demon, because he came to me clothed in light like the angel of his name. He had only touched me once. Only once upon my body.

Abraham looked down at me. I hated him. I hated his compassion. I hated what he had done, bathed and clothed himself in the ways of the world, cut his hair and shaved his saintly beard and called himself my lover. Lied to save my soul. Lied, because he loved me.

Bitter laughter welled within me. I bit it back. His mind was all forgiveness. A penance, a simple punishment, fasting and prayer, a return to the life of the saint; God would love me again, as He had loved the Magdalene.

"God hates me," I said with utter calm, "I hate Him,"

He did not flinch even at that. He was a perfect saint, was Father Abraham. "God loves you with a stainless love. He has but tested you."

"Then I have failed."

"Not yet. Not ever, until the moment of your death."

"May it come soon."

"Maria," he said. How I loathed that name! "What life is this? Adorning your body, scenting it with unguents, offering it for sale to any who asks for it. To any man, even the most vile, whose very presence is a stain upon your soul. Will you let him drag you down into the Pit?"

Lies, all his faith; holy lies. But his words were truth. I remembered some who, being wealthy, came often: foul within and without. Their foulness was my dark joy. My soul was lost. They had damned it, those pious hermits, when they thought to save it from damnation.

I looked into my uncle's eyes. I saw the desert there, the clustered cells, the withered filthy bodies given up to God. So stark, all of it. So bare and so utterly barren.

Emptiness is the same whether one clothes it in sackcloth or in jewels. The old saint spoke to me, gentle words, holy words, words that meant to

heal. I heard not one of them. I saw the desert; I saw the horror from which he had shrunk, my poor lost lover; the only one who had never possessed my body; the only one who ever died for loving me. I could scarcely now remember his face.

God and the desert had taken him. God and the desert reached out for me, calling me. What did it matter? The light and the burning sand, the night and the burning flesh — all was the same, all vanity.

Abraham took my hand. "Come, child," he said. "Come home with me." I cast off all my finery and followed him.

I lie on stone. The sky is empty. No one like me, no one anywhere to share my soul. Save God, in Whom is ecstasy but no companionship. I curse Him, Who made me as I am. I bless Him, Who grants me this holy suffering.

The stone is hard - glory be to God.

I shall be a saint. Cold comfort when the moon is high, its light calling back my memory. I am a saint already. There is none more lonely or more austere or closer to God. Miracles flow from my hands and from my blessed soul.

My heart is cold - glory be to God.

AUTOGRAPH

Hal Clement's line was down to one; I stopped, presenting pen, With More Than Human in my hand, On impulse rather than design, I had this famous man to sign His name upon a work by Sturgeon.

Red-faced I left and more bereft Of dignity from flubs — I'd called him "Mr. Clement," He's signed it "Harry Stubbs."

- Marge Simon





J. R. Dunn made his first fiction sale, "Long Knives;" to the Writers of the Future program, and has, since then, sold stories to Omin and The World & I. Current projects include a novel, tentatively titled "This Side of Judgment," and a series for The World & I on the influence of politics on popular culture, which he hopes to expand into book form.

1

Reflections of the noon sun were dancing off the waves when the helicopter appeared from the south. Tran narrowed his eyes as he watched it approach, a small dot suspended above the blue of the Pacific. He had known they would come eventually, had known even before setting out, but it was still too soon. He had hoped for a little more time, enough to fill the freezers before heading back to port. A few more days, as little as a week . . . the payments on the boat were long overdue, and as always it needed repairs.

There came a burst of chatter from the stern, and he turned to see the Malays, loading forgotten, pointing and waving at the chopper. Old Duong was

nowhere in sight, in the freezer most likely, and the boy. . . .

He had no sooner thought it than his son clambered out of the hold, shirtless, waring a headband, American sneakers, and blue jeans. The boy slanced first at the Malays then out over the ocean, eyes widening as he saw the helicopter. He stepped lightly off the hatch cover and moved to 'Tran's side. "Are they coming here?"

Tran studied the chopper as it settled toward the water. "Yes," he said sourly.

"What do they want?"

Tran merely grunted. The helicopter had stopped about sixty yards off and was hovering, nose on to the boat. Dropping to within a few feet of the water, it swung slowly about, displaying the insignia painted on its side: a light blue globe flanked by two branches. A chill passed through him. He had not seen that symbol for years, not since Tibet.

The boy leaned farther over the railing, mouth open, eyes wide with excitement. "Let me talk to them when they come aboard," he said, glancing

up at Tran. "They probably speak English, and I . . ."

"You'll do no such thing," Tran said. "You'll get back to work, and I'll do what talking there is." The boy stared at him sullenly, then turned away and walked back to the hatch. Tran followed him with his eyes. "As should be," he said, not knowing if he heard.

He turned back to the helicopter. It hung above the water, seeming to touch the waves. As he watched, the lower part of the nose broke off and, with barely a splash, began to move toward the boat. He could see two figures inside, and felt another flash of unease as he realized that the darker one

was a Chinese. It was not until the craft neared the hull and the man stood up that he realized he was too tall to be a Chinese mainlander; he had to be an American, then.

"Permission to come aboard?"

Tran looked down at him unspeaking, then nodded his head. The man stepped on the side of the craft, which did not seem to move under his weight, then vaulted easily over the topsides. The other followed more clumsily.

They were both dressed in khaki uniforms, with shoulder patches bearing the same symbol as on the chopper and the initials UNOA. The Chinese was a head taller than Tran and had the open manner of an American, smiling and nodding to the Malays, the boy, and Duong, who had risen halfway out of the hatch to peer owlishly at them from underneath his straw hat. The other was a European, one of those strange types with hair almost as white as an old man's. He was wearing sunglasses, and when he took them off, his eyes were pale and blue as sky.

The European took a step toward him. "Do you speak English" he asked with an accent that Tran could barely understand. Not waiting for a reply, he went on, opening a small case he took from under his arm. "We have a United Nations emergency order for this area of the Philippine Sea, from 10 degrees north to ..."

"He's not following you, Sven," the Chinese - no, the American - said.

"Eh?" The European looked up. "So I see."

Leaning forward, the American asked him in a swift rush of Mandarin if he spoke Chinese. Tran waited a moment, glancing between the two of them before shaking his head. The man pursed his lips and looked out over the waves. "We got trouble," he said. "He's Vietnamese. Thought so when I came aboard."

The European closed the case and slipped it back under his arm. "What is a Viet doing in these waters?"

"Same thing as everybody else, I suppose."

"Well, that explains why he didn't respond to the radio calls." He looked about him with a slight curl to his lip. "If this washtub even has one." His pale eyes fell on the Duong and the boy. "Perhaps one of the crew..." The boy began to rise from his perch on the edge of the hatch, but sat back down at Tran's from. "But I suppose not?" the European finished. He turned back to the American. "Well, what do you suggest? I'm sure they don't speak Swedish." He shook his head. "They have to be warned. I hate to think what will happen to this rustpail when the fleet comes through."

"Yeah." The American nodded. "I'm trying to think . . . we've got no Vietnamese speakers that I know of. Wait . . ." He turned to Tran. "Parlee

Voo Fransay?"

Tran felt it was safe to nod. The American gave him a broad smile and bobbed his head up and down. "Okay. There's a French Canadian in team 12 a couple hundred klicks north. We can radio 'em, and they'll be here in

an hour or two."

"Well, that's it, then." The European opened the case again, took out some papers, and handed them to Tran. Behind him the American shook his head. "C"non, Sven, he can't even read 'em."

The European shot him an irritated glance. "Nonetheless, it's required." He thrust the papers into Tran's hands, then nodded curtly and turned away. The American stepped forward, extending his hand. Tran stared at it for a moment, then took it and bowed. The American smiled. "Okay, pal, sood luck to you."

He climbed back into the boat, and the European started it back to the helicopter. As they went, the American waved at the Malays, who were shouting farewell. Tran turned away, looking over the sheets that the European had given him. Although he had never learned to read, he could see that the top one was in English, and the second in ideographs, Chinese or Japanese, but he couldn't tell. The third he could not make out at all: Spanish, perhaps, or one of the island languages. He was about to fold the sheets and put them in his pocket when he noticed the boy standing next to him, looking at them in silence. He hesitated, then handed them over. He would have to explain the whole business anyway, and perhaps the writing would tell him something he didn't know.

The boy took the sheets eagerly and looked through them before turning back to the one in English. He began to read it aloud, slowly, stumbling over the longer words. "United Nations Oceanic Administration Emergency Order No. 5278 . . . The People's Republic of China has as of 8.7-12 commenced harvesting krill in the Philippine Sea in defiance of treaty and Security Council order. . . . Safety of vessels between ten o and twenty o north . . . and one forty o . . ."

Tran turned away and looked out at the helicopter. The boatlike craft had made it back and reattached itself by some means he could not see, and the helicopter rose from the water and flew toward him, passing about fifty feet overhead. This pleased the Malays no end, and even Duong, still sitting in

the hatch as if assigned there, looked up as it passed.

The boy, who had stopped reading as it flew overhead, began once more. "Safety of vessels in this area cannot be... guaranteed, and the UN strongly advises all such vessels to leave the area to avoid possible injury and loss of life..." The boy looked up, wide-eyed. "The krill ships, they're coming here!" He stared at the horizon as if to see them rising above it that moment, then turned to Tran. "What are we going to do?"

Tran held our his hand for the sheets. Reluctantly, the boy gave them back. "For the moment, we are going back to work." He shouted to the Malays, "Let's go. The fish won't get into the hold by themselves." They stopped gawking at the helicopter and returned to the nets. Looking over his shoulder, the boy walked back to the hold. For a moment Duong stared at Tran contemplatively, fingering his beard, then he too vanished below.

A short time later the microcomputer controlling the nets broke down. and he spent a half-hour tracking down the offending chip. He had no faith in the replacement, part of a batch bought black-market at Cam Ranh, and watched it closely for the next two hours, putting the UN men out of his mind until they broke for a meal. Carrying his rice and fish to the stern, he reclined against the king post and took the papers out of his pocket. He riffled through them, then raised his eyes to stare out over the wayes. The krill ships were on their way. They were as big as cities, he had heard, and powered by atom bombs. The UN had told them not to do this thing, and Tran had hoped that they would be stopped. Perhaps that would still happen. But he thought of Tibet, and of Nhuan, and knew that they would stop for nothing and no one. He was raising the rice bowl to his lins when he heard the whine of another helicopter, distant as a mosquito on a humid night, and saw it approaching him from the north. It was then he decided. Let them come, in their great ships. They would have to go around him. He was moving for no Chinese.

Patsy was late for work and exhausted to boot. She'd had a rough couple of days at an island called Guadalcanal covering the seventieth anniversary of a battle that had been fought there, interviewing the old soldiers for what George called "color." It had run her ragged. Between the temperature, humidity, and bugs she had gotten no sleep whatsoever, and to top it off the flight back to Guam had been four hours late. She had not gotten in until two in the morning - and George hadn't used any of the tapes, either.

As she entered the lobby, Yamashita looked up from her console, inspecting her with frosty Oriental disdain. "Ms. Blum," she said, pronouncing it 'bloom' as always, "Mr. Papali'i has been calling you for the past hour." Patsy mumbled thanks and walked past her toward her office — cubicle, really - at the end of the hall. Behind her she heard the phone buzz and Yamashita, now in dulcet tones: "Pacific Broadcasting Network, how may we help you?"

Shutting the door, she threw her purse on the desk and slumped into the chair, still in a half-stupor. There was no sense thinking about breakfast, but she did need coffee before facing George. Maybe one of the boys in the wire room would be nice enough to bring her a cup. . . . As she touched the phone, it bloomed into life, and there he was: George Papali'i, three hundred and ten pounds of Samoan nobility, dressed in a tropical shirt that made him look like a walking orchid plantation with a gold object the size of a walnut dangling from his right ear. In one hand he held a half-eaten danish, and three others sat poised on a plate in front of him.

"Patsy," he cried. He put down the danish and chewed at her with an air

of transcendent delight. "Bird and worm, princess, bird and worm."

Sighing, Patsy closed her eyes. "George," she said, "I've had a rough couple days. . . ."

"What do you mean? You did pretty good. I got a kick out of that old tribesman, what's-his-name, with the US uniform cut into a skirt. There's a hero for va?"

"Then why didn't you use it?"

"Pidgin. No sense putting him on if nobody understands him. Besides"
— he gave her a sly smile — "I've got something better for ya. Captains courageous. Man against the sea."

"What are you talking about?"

"Krill ships, cupcake." He wolfed the last of the danish he was eating and brushed his hands off. "You know krill ships?" Patsy opened her mouth to answer, but he was already off.

"About three years back the Chinese bought a bunch of 'em from France for a pretty good wad. French were moving on to a new model and wanted to get rid of 'em. Everybody thought the Chinese were gonna put 'em down in the Antarctic like normal people, but Beijing had its own ideas." He brushed some crumbs off the desk. "As usual. Anyway, they sent 'em out to seed the Philippine Sea, out by you. First, they dumped in nutrients." He grinned at her. "Bet you don't know what they used."

"Don't be disgusting, George."

He snickered and picked up his coffee cup. It had TONS O' FUN printed on

the side over a cartoon of a Samoan in a grass skirt.

"So they finish with that and then start dumping in plankton, diatoms, building up a food chain. Okay, it turns out it's all genetically boosted for fast growth and it's wiping out the local stuff, and the UN goes wild." He gulped the coffee and put the cup down. "But they don't do a thing. A few debates, lotsa yelling, but don't get the Chinese mad, there's a lot of 'em. A year later they seed the area with krill and let the mess simmer. Now they're back with the whole damn fleet to harvest."

"I heard this when I was -"

George held up his hand. "UN's yelling even louder now, but you know what Peng is like. He doesn't even act like he's heard. Just a message from Beijing saying..." He picked a paper from off his deak. "The People's Republic will not be responsible for any vessels within the area of operations." He put the sheet down and looked at her, eyebrows raised. "How do you like that?"

"This sounds like something that Raineesh would handle —"

"Oh, he is. He's down at UNOA headquarters at Subic right now. I need you for something else. The UN is clearing everybody out of the harvest area. Lotsa fishing boats there since the Chinese screwed around with it, along with normal traffic. Seems there's one guy won't go. Sent a chopper out to him, he wouldn't even let 'em aboard." He picked up another sheet

and squinted at it. "Name's . . . Tran Van Rao. Vietnamese. Go out there and see what he thinks he's doing."

"What about the Chinese?"

"Not talking. All quiet on the Eastern front... but get some shots of 'em anyway. Crew is Sung on camera and the new guy for contact man. You got a chopper at Apra."

"What time?"

George picked up another danish and studied it. "About half an hour

Sighing, Patsy rubbed her temples. She could feel a headache coming on. "Whatsa matter, doll," George said around a mouthful of danish. "You ain't eating right, that's it. I can tell." Magnanimous, he waved the danish at her. "Get yourself a good breakfast first. No rush. Just as long as you're off by" — he glanced at the clock — "eleven or so." Smiling, he clicked off.

Patsy let herself slip lower into the chair. How long had it been since she'd had a story on the air? Two — no, three — months now, and that had been a watercycle race that Brecker at the sports desk hadn't been able to cover. They'd used plenty of her footage since then but always in somebody else's stories, uncredited.

And this would go the same way. Whatever she got would be added to

Rajneesh's piece as a sidebar — Rajneesh, who had been hired a year after her and had moved up more on looks and his slick Oxbridge accent than anything else. That was the way it had been: Fordham School of Journalism couldn't stand up against Oxford, and fat, dumpy little Patsy Blum just wasn't what the viewers wanted.

She got her things together, buzzed Yamashita, and asked her to call a cab. "I'm on a very important call, Ms. Blum. I'll have to buzz you back."

She ended up calling the cab herself.

3

It was in the spring, a few weeks after Tet, when everything changed. There had been people going by the house for days, hundreds of them, all heading south, away from the sounds of explosions and gunfire. Tran had understood none of it, nor had his mother, walking about the house wringing her hands and sometimes weeping silently, told him anything. He became frightened as gunfire grew closer and the refugees swelled into an unending stream.

Then his father came for them. Tran had not seen him for nearly a year and at first did not recognize the man who pulled up in the jeep and stood, one foot in the road, shouting his mother's name. She had hurried out, taking only food and some clothes, pushing Tran in front of het, to find the jeep surrounded by refusees and his father holding them back with an M-16.

They parted sullenly to let them through, most silent, a few cursing the government or the Americans. As he got in, a woman fell on her knees crying hysterically and holding up a baby. Young as he was, Tran knew that the child was dead. Then his father started the jeep and pushed it slowly through the crowd, steering with one hand and holding the rifle with the other.

They got only five miles out of town before they hit a roadblock, a wrecked schoolbus surrounded by rangers in bush hats and camouflage gear. They stopped the jeep at gunpoint and ordered them out. Tran's father argued with them, but he was outnumbered and had no choice; the rangers piled in and headed down the road toward Saigon. It was just as well; they came upon the jeep a few miles farther, on its side and burning, with the bodies of the rangers scattered around it.

They walked the rest of the afternoon, gathering a crowd of refugees attracted by the man in uniform. His father removed his lieutenant's bars after his mother insisted, but refused to change the olive-drab clothes or take off his boots. In the heat of the day they trudged south with thousands of others, past abandoned villages and fields where ho one worked. Around dusk they heard screams and shouting ahead of them, and above them a new sound: the clank and rumble of engines. His father stopped and peered ahead into the gloom, then ran forward as the tanks, festooned with troops, came into view. A few of the soldiers slid off and moved toward them, crouched down with guns at ready. His father called back, "I told you the Americans wouldn't leave us! I told you.?' falling silent as he saw the shapes of their helmets and the red stars on the tanks. He dropped the gun then and raised his hands. Two of the Northerners ran up to him and, nudging him with their rifles, took him off into the bush.

That was the last time that Tran saw his father. He had been about five years old.

He stood on the deck watching the sun rise, trying to remember his father's face. As always, he could not. All he could picture was that defeated figure in the ARVN uniform, standing in the twilight as the tanks came rolling toward him.

One of the Malays awoke and rolled out of his hammock. He took a few steps across the deck, stretching and singing to himself, falling silent when he saw Tran. He stared for a moment, then smiled uneasily and headed for the ladder.

They had been acting that way since the confrontation with the Frenchman yesterday. It had been a quick business — Tran had simply told him that he had no intention of going anywhere, the Frenchman had started shouting and waving his arms about, and Tran had turned and walked away. After a little more bellowing, the Frenchman had made a rude gesture, then went back to his chopper, and that had been the end of it.

Tran didn't know how much the Malays understood of it all — they spoke

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only their own tongue and a little Chinese — but they had gathered something was going on. He had seen them later on in the afternoon, speaking in low voices to Duong.

He went into the wheelhouse, switched on the sonar, and fiddled with it until it was working. The school of yellowfin had moved during the night and was now half a klick to the west. He started the engine and turned the boat in that direction. Below deck he could hear his son in the galley cooking breakfast. He thought of the boy's mother, but pushed it from his mind.

His own mother had not long outlived her husband. He remembered her quite well. She had been a small ownan, quite of voice and manner, and always afraid. Together they had wandered south for several weeks before being picked up and sent to the camps. She died there a year later. It had not been the hunger or the harshness of the bo doi that had killed her; she had just turned her face to the wall one day and drifted away.

After that came the years in the camps. But for the kindness of one of the cadres he would have been put out in the streets along with the thousands of other orphans left by war and purges. Instead, he stayed on as a kind of mascot to the camp, doing the odd jobs a small boy could handle. When he was older, he went to work with the rest of the prisoners, former members of the government or army, who had not been rehabilitated and knew they never would be. They were sent wherever they were needed, to the Delta for the rice harvest, to Da Nang and Hue for rebuilding, and to Cambodia to work on airfields.

They had not been easy years, and he had done his best to forget them. Often he had been hungry, and fearful as well. Once a group of the older men had attempted an escape, hoping to get to the highlands where they knew the resistance was operating. They tried to talk him into coming along, saying that it was a shame that one so young should waste his life in such a place, but he had refused. It had been well that he had. An informer told the bo doi of their plans, and they were caught within sight of the camp. Three of them were shot while running and one brought back for punishment sessions that he did not survive.

Then, in his teens, he was told to leave. Somewhere, a clerk had come across his file and realized that he did not belong there. He was called in from the work site and told he was free to go. He nearly broke down then, begging them not to send him away, but the camp officials were firm. They gave him a sheet of paper saying he was free, and sent him out into the world.

He stood before the gate, frightened and not knowing where to go. He had no family — his grandparents had died years ago. He knew no one on the outside . . . then he remembered Nguyen, the old fisherman released a few months before. He had been friendly, telling Tran stories of the ocean he had never seen. Tran knew the name of his village, Phu Nhon, a few miles down the coast from Hue. Hesitating, he looked back at the camp, then be-

gan walking east, toward the sea. . . .

The boy stepped into the wheelhouse and handed Tran a cup of tea. He left without a word, and Tran frowned after him before looking forth to inspect the morning.

His eyes narrowed as he scanned the northwest. There was something out there, at the bare edge of visibility. Picking up the binoculars, he looked through them to see a splash of white moving quickly to the west — a pleasure boat, most likely out of Guam or Manila, hurrying out of harm's way. He mut the binoculars down and went to the salle for breakfast.

Afterward, he went to the stern to put out the net. The Malays were much more subdued than usual; there was none of their accustomed chatter or singing as they lowered the netting over the side. He watched them for a few minutes, then set the motor to unreel it slowly before going forward.

He decided to check the catch before going to the wheelhouse. What he found in the freezer pleased him. By his reckoning they were near to break-ing even and a few more days — perhaps as few as three — would pay the bills and leave enough to make repairs and live decently for a while. He would just have to hone —

There was a shout from the deck, and he stepped from the freezer and climbed quickly out of the hold. The Malays were pointing to starboard, and he turned to look.

At first he could not believe what he saw, then it sunk in and his hopes vanished in an instant. There were two—no, three—helicopters headed toward him, along with a hovecraft racing at full bore. It was the UN people, back in force. He began shaking. He had never heard of them doing a thing like this. He thought of the pistol in the wheelhouse, but no, there were far too many of them.

One of the choppers broke off from the rest and roared in, low over the water. Tran ducked instinctively, sure that it would hit the mast. When no crash came, he looked up to see it hovering less than twenty feet overhead. A man wearing sunglasses leaned out and smiled down at him, then raised a microphone to his lips: "MR. . . . AHHH, CAPTAIN TRAN. THIS IS BRAD TELFORD OF NBC NEWS. !'D LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOU FOR A FEW MINUTES IF YOU DON'T MIND."

Rising slowly, Tran gaped at the man for a moment then lowered his head. He stared down at the deck, nodding to himself, then signaled to the Malays to bring the net back in. The hovercraft, emblazoned with an all-seeing eye, slowed down to pull next to the boat, with the helicopters close behind. He walked slowly toward the wheelhouse. There would be no more fishing today. This being summer the island was overwhelmed with tourists, most of them Japanese honeymooners, and the traffic was beyond belief. It was noon before Patsy got to the harbor, and she considered herself lucky. As the cab pulled up to the helicopter pad, she looked in her purse and found only twenties. Holding one up, she asked the driver, "You wouldn't have change?" He glanced at the bill as if it were a particularly odious specimen of fungal life and shook his head in disdain.

She rooted around in her purse some more, then gave up and looked out the window, hoping to see Frankie Sung. After a moment she caught sight of him lounging against a railing by the entrance and called out his name. He waved and walked over.

"Frankie, do you have a five on you?"

"Sure." He opened his wallet and paid the driver, who took it without comment. Patsy got out and the cab whirred off.

Wiping the sweat off her forehead, she grimaced at Frankie. "Sticky." She leaned over to pick up her case, but he beat her to it. Frankie was nice that way. "Rough morning?"

"Yeah. George dropped this on me an hour ago."

He grinned. "Sounds just like him."

"Oh, you're not kidding." She looked through her purse for sunglasses, found she hadn't brought them. "You had time to get any background on this?"

"Yeah, what there is of it. Our boy's name is Tran Van Rao, operating a boat out of Cam Ranh, crew of four. Name of the boat is the Quan Tu Tau."

"That mean anything?"

"Something like noble person ... a knight or knight errant, along those lines. It's an old menhaden boat that he bought under that Japanese goodneighbor program about five years back. Been modified, engine computerized and so on, but it's still an old tub." His eyebrows went up behind his sunglasses. "And that's it. I've got a search going on in the net, but it'll take a while before we get anything."

"Any idea why he won't leave?"

"Nope. He just told the UN rep, guy named Douhet, that he wasn't moving, and that was that. He was out there alone, no other boats with him, which is kind of odd. My guess is he had a brainstorm that the fishing would be great in the seeded area and took off on his own, like the local boys."

They had reached the steps to the helipad. Looking up Patsy saw the chopper, a late model Bell with no markings — PBN always rented equipment or, like their comm satellite, bought it secondhand — but fitted with communications antennae. Lounging against the nose was a shirtless, well-built man in his twenties with tatrooed arms and a bushy mustache. He raised his aviator glasses as they reached the top of the steps, and fixed them

with a blue-eyed glare. "Right," he snapped, then climbed into the cockpit muttering to himself.

"That's the pilot?" Patsy whispered.

"Yep. Neville Walsh. Beer-drinking Aussie. Doesn't like media people."
He put the case into the chopper then helped her up. "Doesn't think much of women either."

It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the dimness inside. In the cockpit Walsh was pulling on a T-shirt that had a picture of some singer on it before starting the engines. In the back a young Japanese was sitting in front of the comm system. She stepped over to him and extended her hand. Bowing his head politely, he took it and said, "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Blum. Blaise Nagano."

The rotors had started to turn, and Patsy had to lean forward to hear what he said. "Blaise?"

He smiled up at her. "Yes, Pascal. My family is Catholic."

"Oh, I see ..." Patsy said, but just then the chopper lifted off and she fell backward, landing hard in a seat. She glared toward the cockpit, but Walsh was paying no attention. Turning back to Blaise, she smiled in embarrassment then busied herself with her case.

"Goddam," Frankie said. He unstrapped the camera from his shoulder and began going over the diagnostics. They were about two hours out of Guam and had just overflown a liner heading south out of the danger zone, and Frankie had been trying to get some shots of it for background. Patsy turned to him. "What is it?"

"Vibration sensor's out. If I can't fix it, the footage'll be blurred. Damn Sonys."

"Is that last year's model?" Blaise called out.

"Yeah."

"I think I know what it is . . ." They began trading tech talk.

Patsy rose and went forward. She leaned over the empty copilot's seat and looked out over the water. There was nothing in sight. She turned to Walsh. "How soon will we be in the area. Mr. Walsh?"

He shook his head and mumbled something that sounded like "Are we there yet?" She leaned toward him. "I beg your pardon?"

Walsh glared at her from behind his sunglasses. "Any minute."

"You'll let me know when you see something?"

He sneered out of the canopy. "Right."
"Thank you." She stepped carefully back into the cabin, bracing herself

against the ceiling in case Walsh ran into turbulence or had to dodge a meteor. Sitting down, she took the headset out of her case and began testing. "Blaise," she said, "are you picking me up okay?"

"Yes, Ms. Blum."

"Patsy is fine, Blaise." He turned his head and smiled at her. From the

cockpit came a cry of "bloody hell." For a moment she thought Walsh was talking about them, but then Frankie said, "Jesus," and lifted the camera to his shoulder, and she headed up front to the cockpit.

It looked like a dogfight was going on. A mile ahead of them two hovercraft were circling a small boat as if trying to keep it from escaping while a half a dozen helicopters swarmed overhead, some hovering while others flew back and forth only a few feet above the water. In the boat there were people at the stern gazing up at the helicopters, but otherwise no sign of ac-

Walsh was acting as if he had been beaten to something he wanted very badly. "Look at the bastards," he said. "Bloody hell."

Patsy stared quizzically at him for a second then called to Frankie over her shoulder, "Who are those people?"

"Everybody. The big boys, Aussie Broadcasting, all the Japanese net-works, the Indonesians . . "

"I can't believe it."

Frankie looked up from the viewfinder. "It's the silly season."

"I've got a call for you, Patsy," Blaise said.

"For me?" She made her way back to the screen over the comm unit. It flickered into life and a face appeared that she recognized immediately: Brad Telford, NBC's Pacific correspondent. He looked as if he had stepped out of a travel commercial, skin flawlessly tanned, hair slicked back, wearing the open-necked white shirt that was virtually the tropical uniform of the bigleaguers. "Well, uhh . . . Patty Blum. Nice to see you again."

"Patsy."

"Uh, yes. Well, how are the islands these days?"

"Brad, what's going on out here?"

He unleashed his teeth and gave her a throaty, on-air chuckle. "Damned if I know. I didn't think it was that big a deal myself. Nothing much was happening in Luzon, so I decided to take a spin up here. I got here first," he put a definite emphasis on the word, "early this morning, and the rest of them showed up a short while later."

"And what does the captain have to say about it?"

Telford frowned at her. "The captain? Oh yes." He chuckled again. "Nothing much at all. He went into the cabin when we showed up and has just come out a couple of times to look around. He hasn't granted an interview yet."

"I see."

"We were thinking of forming a pool, sending one man in to speak for all of us. With due credit, of course." His teeth lunged forth once more. "And since I'm the most experienced . . ."

Patsy dropped her eyes and thought for a second. Telford had been in the South Pacific for . . . ves, two years. She looked up and smiled, trying to seem attentive.

"... may be frightened by all the commotion. I say we pull the choppers back, and I'll go in aboard a hovercraft." He leaned toward the screen and lowered his voice. "He's Vietnamese. You know what those people think about helicopters."

Turning from the screen, Patsy looked out the side window. They were over the boat now, about a thousand feet above the milling helicopters. "No. I don't."

"Yes. Well, it'll have to be soon. I'm getting a little low on fuel here."

There was a sudden shout from aboard Telford's chopper, and almost

simultaneously Frankie called out to her. She glanced out the window to see something happening below. On the screen Telford, a startled look on his face, reach up to touch his hair. "Have to run, Patty," he said, and the screen went blank.

Grabbing the headset, Patsy went to the side window. It took her a moment before she saw that the Indonesian helicopter was far too low over the boat. As she watched, it settled a few feet then roared back upward. Walsh brought them lower, and she saw what had happened: the chopper had run into the boat's antenna rig, and its landing gear had become entangled. Again the chopper surged skyward, and with a crack audible from where she sat, the antenna broke. Aboard the boat a man wearing a baseball cap and a khaki shirt ran out on deck and began shaking his fists at the sky. If 'Tran hadn't disliked helicopters before, he sure did now.

The chopper fell away from the boat, antenna dangling beneath it, dropping to within a few feet of the water. It recovered and began to rise. After a few desultory swings the antenna dropped away and disappeared with a splash, taking a piece of the landing gear with it.

"Goodo," Walsh bellowed. "Right fair go, you silly wog bastard."

Stopping its climb, the chopper paused for a moment as if considering its options then turned and flew off. The others milled around a safe distance from the boat, then followed. In a few minutes only the hovercraft were left, still prowling in circles around the boat.

Patsy turned from the window. "You get all that, Frankie?"

"Yeah." He unstrapped the vidcam and put it on the seat. "He had to dip to avoid one of the Japanese copters and hit the mast. Then, I don't know. Probably just panicked."

"Too right," Walsh muttered.

Looking out the side window, Patsy could see no one on the boat's deck. "Well, he won't feel much like talking now."

"At least you've got something."

She grimaced. "Reporting on the reporters. Great." Turning to Blaise, she told him to get ready to transmit, then went forward. "Mr. Walsh, I'd like you to fly us over the krill fleet on the way back."

"Úh."

Sitting down, she stared out the window at the boat. Now even the hover-

craft had gone, leaving the boat alone on the water. Putting the headset on she began speaking of the fools of her profession, watching the boat grow smaller and vanish against the sea.

The krill ships appeared suddenly, first a thin gray line between sea and sky that soon separated into individual objects, slope-sided boxes that appeared to hover above the water on cushions of white foam. There was no way to gauge their size except for the time it took to reach them once they had come into sight.

Patsy stood behind the copilot's seat and watched them draw near. "Frankie," she said without turning, "has anybody talked to them?" "No. They're under radio silence. The whole thing's under military com-

"No. They're under radio silence. The whole thing's under military command with an admiral in charge, name of Liu."

"There must be some kind of crash code."

"There is," Blaise said. "The Indonesian Navy claims to have it, but of course nobody's buying."

Nodding to herself, Parsy watched the ships come on. Details were beginning to become apparent: the kilometer-wide sea gates extending to either side, channeling water and krill into the processing chutes; the small bridge high up on the front, "bow" didn't seem right for objects this size; the Chinese lettering, perhaps a hundred feet hish, painted iust below.

"I wonder what those ideographs mean."

"For sale," Frankie said.

Patsy smiled. That wouldn't surprise her. Krill fleets were expensive, and while no one knew how much the Chinese had spent on theirs, it had to be over a hundred billion, a lot of money for a country that poor. How they were paying for it was anybody's guess, but it probably had something to do with why they were seeding such a huge area of ocean, in defiance of a half-dozen UN decrees. Nobody needed that much krill, not even the Chinese and the smart money said that they were going to try to break the international market. Again, no one knew for sure. As always, Peng kept his plans to himself.

Frankie squeezed past her to the copilot's seat and began shooting through the windshield, provoking a bout of muttering from Walsh. After a moment Patsy turned to him, "Have they said anything about the boat?"

"The question is being researched."

"Which means go to hell."

"You got it. I'm just glad I'm not aboard." He lowered the camera and shook his head. "I mean, look at 'em."

The fleet, still miles ahead, filled their entire range of vision. In two staggered rows they stretched from horizon to horizon, gray monoliths riding carpets of foam, each identical except for the lettering on the hulls.

"People's Will;" Frankie said, nodding out the window. "That's what the one ahead of us reads. And the one next to it . . ."

Walsh suddenly picked up the radio mike and began speaking into it. "11259 acknowledge." Then: "Right...right...goodo, out." He replaced the mike and started the chooper in a slow banking turn.

Patsy stared at him. "What was that?"

"Sixth Fleet air patrol," Walsh said slowly, as if each word wore a price tag. "Ordered us out of the area. Bloody Chinese getting antsy about over-flights." He sneered regally at the ships below. "Stuck-up sorts."

They headed north, paralleling the line of ships. As the miles passed and more of them appeared, Patsy thought again of the lonely boat to the west. "Frankie," she said finally, "what kind of antenna was that anyway?"

He looked up from the viewfinder. "Don't know."

"Could you find out?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Probably."

Nodding, Patsy went back and sat down in the window seat, watching the massive ships pass until the chopper turned toward Guam and they were blotted out by the late afternoon sun.

The boat was quiet. Duong and the boy were below, the Malays asleep in the hammocks at the stern. Tran heard sleepy mumbling from one of them and turned his head toward the sound, but it faded and he looked back out over the dark sea.

He had worked them hard after the newspeopie left, trying to salvage the day. The hovercraft had scattered the school they had been fishing, but the sea here was rich and it hadn't taken him long to find another. As it was, they hadn't netted half as much as he would have liked, and the loss of the antenna — he looked up at the stump, feeling a dull throb of anger — meant that he'd merely broken even.

The loss of the radio worried him, as he'd been counting on it to give some warning as to the arrival of the Chinese. He had tested it even before the he-licopters had gone, getting only faraway voices masked by static. It occurred to him now that he could use that as an excuse, a reason to flee: but no, his course was set and he wouldn't back down now.

There came a faint sound of engines. He looked up apprehensively, but it was only an airplane, an old propeller type in use here long after the rest of the world had forgotten them. He could see its blinking lights far to the north, and beyond it a spot of brightness larger than any star, moving slowly across the night: one of the great scace stations of the larganese or Americans.

He gazed at it, that strange place where men floated like bubbles, wondering if someone there was looking down toward him. The boy often talked about the stations with excitement and longing, as if he would like to visit them some day. Tran, perhaps too harsh in most things, had not had the

heart to tell him that they were not for him.

He watched until the spot vanished behind a low-lying bank of clouds to the west, then, weary, he turned from the railing and went below.

Hours later he awoke, not knowing for a moment where he was. He lay there grasping at the remnants of dream: Nhuan as he had first seen her, dressed in a white ao dai, hair black in the sun.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then looked bleakly around the small cabin. It was still dark, and a glance at the clock told him dawn was two hours away. Outside he could hear rain. It was cool in the cabin, so he got up and put on shirt and pants before lying back down on the narrow cot. Putting his hands behind his head, he stared up into the darkness, wondering why such a dream had come to him at just this time.

He had met her at Phu Nhon during his first years as a fisherman. It had taken him weeks to get there, but the old man had given him a fond welcome. His own sons had died in the war, and he had no one to help him with his boat. They did not discuss the matter; Tran rested for a few days, and the next time Nguyen went out, he went along and began to learn the ways of the sea.

The first few weeks were strange for him. He was used to camp routine — had never known anything else — and for a long time behaved as if he were still there. But the villagers had seen this before, and it came as no surprise to them. They gave him time, and within a year it was as if he were one of them.

There was much that was new, and many things to learn, some of them not easy, but the hardest of these was the women. He had no experience of them, and his sole knowledge came from the tales told in the camps. The girls of the village troubled him in a way that he could not fathom; when he encountered them, he would walk past quickly, eyes to the ground, saying nothing. Once a group of them had caught him staring at them from the sampan as he sat repairing the nets. They had laughed and whispered among themselves, and he had gotten up, face burning, to retreat inside the boat.

He had been at Phu Nhon for two years when the government sent word that the fish quota was to be raised; the rice harvest had failed once again, and more food was needed for the cities. The fisherman had grumbled but did nothing; no one wanted his boat confiscated or to suffer a term in the camps.

The trucks were waiting that evening when they returned. Bringing the sampans close to shore, they handed baskets of fish to the villagers while troops came aboard to make sure that they were not holding anything back. Nguyen's boat was one of the last in, and by that time the soldiers were tired and surly, shouting at them to hurry it up.

Tran was filling baskets and handing them to whoever waited, paying no

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attention to who it was. He lowered one over the side and paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes, then looked down to see her standing there: a young girl dressed in white, trousers rolled up to her knees, her straw hat resting on her shoulders. She smiled up at him and said something.

Strangely, he could never remember what it was. All he could recall was her face, narrow for a village girl, with dark eyes and high cheekbones, gazing up at him. He had never forgotten that moment, the way she looked standing in the water in the late sun. It was as real to him now as it was then; he would carry it to his grave.

He mumbled something and turned away to fill another basket. When he returned, she was still there, no longer smiling, her eyes thoughtful as if she were deciding something. She stepped closer to the boat and said quietly, "My name is Khanh Tu Nhuan."

He stared at her for a moment, then dropped his eyes. "Tran," he said in a voice scarcely above a whisper. She reached up and touched the sleeve of his shirt, ragged and patched, the same one he had worn in the camps. "You need a new shirt."

He looked to see her smiling again. "I could make you one."

From the shore there came a shout: an officer, pacing the sand well above the waterline for fear of getting his boots wet. "You there," he bellowed, pointing at them. "Get a move on!"

Looking down at her, he nodded wordlessly, and she lowered her hand and, still smiling, turned to the beach.

He stood looking after her until the officer began shouting again, then handed the basket of fish to a villager before going to get another.

She came again the next morning, and the morning after that, bringing him fruit from the small plot behind her mother's house. She made him the shirt she had promised, and then another, western-style with collar and buttons to wear in the village. They began to spend their evenings together, walking the shore, talking or not as the mood held them. At first he was clumsy, not knowing what to say, but she led him along slowly until he was at ease with her.

It changed him. He no longer acted like a camp orphan. He swung between garrulity and dreaminess. Occasionally, working the nets, he would stop and stare into space. The other fishermen teased him about it, and he said nothing in response, not knowing what to say.

The day came when Nguyen spoke to him about it. Looking at Tran gravely, he said that he had heard a girl was fond of him and asked if he felt he same. Blushing, Tran answered yes. The old man nodded. "These are hard times," he said. "And the young must find what happiness they may." He turned and gazed out the doorway of his small house. "Of course you have no family . ."

Tran felt a stab of fear then, but Nguyen turned back to him with his wrinkled face wreathed in a smile. "... So it seems that I'll have to be your father

this time."

From then on things moved quickly. Nguyen spoke to Nhuan's mother and the marriage was arranged within days. She had been worried about her daughter's prospects for some time. Her husband had been a headman in a village down the coast and was executed after the war, and they too, mother and daughter, had spent a year in the camps. Most of the village men feared marrying a woman with such a thing in her past; Nhuan was nearly twenty and yet unmarried. So even with no family and few prospects she welcomed Tran, and he, on his part, was astonished to find that he had become known as a hard worker.

Then the wedding had come, the priest brought in secret from miles away, the ritual, the feast — he barely recalled any of it, overshadowed as it was by the memory of his first night with her.

He lay next to her afterward, watching her as she slept, unable to sleep himself, reaching out to touch her, not believing what had come to him, with no fear of anything or anyone.

Two weeks later the Chinese came over the border.

The trucks came back to Phu Nhon, this time in search of men. They arrived late at night, after the village was asleep. Tran was aroused by hammering at the door. When he opened it, he saw two soldiers, guns at ready, and the officer who had shouted at him months before. The officer regarded him with no sign of recognition, then nodded and turned away without a word. One of the soldiers gestured with his gun. "Let's go,"

Tran, still half-asleep, said, "My wife . . ." The soldier peered over his shoulder at Nhuan on the sleeping mat, holding the blanket before her, and

shrugged. "All right, but make it quick."

Tran went over to the mat and knelt beside it. He picked up his shirt, the one she had made for him, and looked down at her. She stared up at him, eves wide. "It's the war," she said.

He nodded, then reached for her and held her head against his chest. The soldier called out, "Come on, boy, we don't want to have to shoot you." He held her for another moment, then got up, slipped the shirt on, and went to them. They ushered him out to the trucks, already filled with the young men of the village. He got in and sat on the hard board bench at the side, saring at the ditry metal floor. One of the soldiers climbed in after him, and the truck began to move. He heard his name called and looked back. She was standing there, dressed in white as he had first seen her. He raised his hand and did not lower it until she had vanished from sight.

"Don't worry about it, boy, it's not as bad as all that." It was the soldier, an older man, who had let him go back to her. "A few weeks and this will be over just like the last time."

Within days he was headed north, in a patched uniform from the days of the Liberation War and a gun, an M-16, the same as the one his father had used. He had no bullets for it and had never shot it; ammunition was low

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and had to be saved for the front.

He never did get to fire it. By the time they reached the north, the Fifth Route Army had broken through on all fronts, and the Chinese tanks were waiting for them at the Red River.

The officers made a run for it. They came upon a platoon of front-line troops heading down the road, dirty, bedraggled, some of them wounded. There was a brief consultation when they reached the head of the column, then the officers turned their jeeps around and headed south. The platoon marched past, dead-eyed, looking straight ahead, without a word to any of them. They piled out of the trucks, watching the marchers vanish down the road, asking each other what it meant. A few minutes later they heard the road of cannon and rockets, and they knew. Two helicopters appeared, heading toward them from over the trees, and they scattered, throwing themselves in the fields as the trucks exploded behind them. The tanks and infantry followed a short time later, moving slowly at first until they realized that there was no resistance, then racing up to them, ordering them to throw away their useless weapons.

Afterward, they were marched north along with the thousands of others caught in the encirclement. At the border they were put aboard trains and shipped off, packed in like livestock. There was little food or water, and many of the wounded died on the way. During a stop in a town a guard — one of the few Chinese who spoke to them — told them where they were going. It was a place few of them had heard of, a land far to the north called Tibet.

Days later they were ordered off the train and marched for miles across a bleak and treeless landscape. The air was thin and cold; the ground covered with a white blanket that he had never seen before but would color his dreams forever after. They were led through a gate in an endless barbed-wire fence and marched past a group of low buildings to a flat area beyond. There, they lined up and a chinese officer, in greatoot and fur hat, stepped in front of them and began to speak. They were prisoners of war and would be treated as such. Rules would be posted and they would learn them or be punished. All guards and officers were to be regarded as superiors. Any attempt at escape would result in death. Since the barracks were full, they would be brought materials to build tents. Later — and here he paused — there would no doubt be room for them. He then turned on his heel and marched away, leaving them standing in silence while a few flakes of snow fell from an overcast sky.

He no longer remembered much of what had happened in that place, just a haze of hunger and cold. They were given only thin blankets, no coats or boots, and hundreds of them died in the first weeks until, as the officer had said, there was room in the barracks. A few incidents stood out, moments of terror and cruelty: the young boy, stalking a snake or lizard across the compound, who had crawled up to the fence before being shot; the man maddened by hunger who had torn at his bunkmate with hands like claws before

being taken away, never to be seen again; the informer hanged from the barracks crossbeam in the dead of night.

What kept Tran alive was the knowledge that he would someday return home. He had been in camps before - though not like this - and he knew that the years would end, and that Nhuan would be waiting for him. He withstood the hunger, the cold, the beatings, and waited.

After an eternity their treatment changed. They were given better food, clothes to replace the tattered uniforms they had arrived in, and medical help for the sick. The guards began to treat them better as well; there were no more shootings or beatings. Then one day the helicopters came, globe and branch painted on their sides. The men aboard, some Europeans but mostly Japanese, were the ones who told them: the war was over, they were going back to Vietnam.

Tran heard the story on his way back to the border. The Chinese had taken the entire country in just a few months of fighting, then had moved on to Cambodia and Laos. The Vietnamese reacted as they had a hundred times before; they took to the hills and jungles and gave their conquerors no peace. For two years they fought as guerrillas, then the Chinese, wiser than the French or Americans, made an arrangement. They would pull out of the country and leave it alone. Indochina would become a neutral area under the protection of Japan. China would have peace on its southern border, and the Vietnamese would have their independence. There was much more, but

Tran paid little attention; he was going home.

They wanted him to stay a few weeks at the resettlement camp on the border, but he insisted on heading south. He was given food and a few ven to help him along, and he went on his way. He was still sick, he weighed less than ninety pounds, and the clothes he had been given were far too large, but nothing could take the sun from his heart as he made his way down the coast.

He reached Phu Nhon after three days of walking and catching rides from the Japanese, who were everywhere. The village was not as he had left it; most of the houses were gone, burned down and not replaced. A sense of foreboding touched him then, and he hurried inland, breaking into a run when he saw her mother's house, intact at the end of the short dirt road. Doan was working in the small plot next to it, a small boy playing beside her. She turned, not recognizing him for a moment, then dropped her hoe and came to him, arms outstretched. He held her, babbling, asking about

She stiffened, then stepped back with her head down. When he asked her again, she took him by the arm and led him behind the house. He was already shaking his head before he saw the low mound of dirt. He stood before it for a moment, unable to move, then fell upon it, clawing at the earth, sobbing and calling her name. Doan touched him on the shoulder, saving soothing words, asking him to come inside. He could not. After a time she left and returned with two men of the village, who carried him into the house.

For days afterward he did not eat, or move, or speak to another human being. Doan brought food to him, begging him to eat, sometimes crying as she sat next to him. Finally, a Japanese doctor came, who looked him over and then sat quietly as Doan told him the story. She kept her voice low, but Tran heard it all, though he did not understand it until much later.

The Chinese had occupied Phu Nhon early in the war and had been under constant attack since then. Many had been ambushed, while others were stilled by the booby traps set in the bush nearby. The troops developed a loathing for the villagers, and when word of peace came, they went mad, burning the village, shooting the inhabitants, raping and bayoneting the women. Nhuan had not been spared.

The doctor gave Tran a shot and left a bottle of pills, promising to be back. As he left, he told Doan that it might be of some help for the child to sleep next to him.

For a week Doan took care of Tran like a baby, while the boy sat and watched with wide eyes. She gave Tran the pills when she fed him, and they allowed him to sleep without dreams. The doctor came back, speaking to him in a quiet voice, but he did not answer. And there were others: a Buddhist priests, chanting prayers over him, and an old man who sat quietly, saying not a word: Nguyen.

He awoke one morning feeling as if he had been on a long voyage. It was early, well before the heat of the day, and the shadows stretched across the ground outside.

He pushed himself up on one arm and gazed down at the boy sleeping next to him, the small fist curled up in front of his face. Then he rose, put his clothes on, and walked to the door. As he reached it, Doan awoke, looking up at him with a tentative smile. He nodded to her and walked out of the house and down the dirt road to the shore. Nguyen was sitting in the sampan as if waiting for him. He climbed aboard, and a few minutes later they set sail.

Within a year he had his own boat. He worked constantly, spending little time ashore, going our farther and staying longer than any of the other fishermen. He said little to anyone. When Nguyen became too frail to work, and Doan after him, he took care of them, as was proper.

Never did he speak of Nhuan.

He was respected but not liked. The villagers were uncomfortable with him, and thought that he looked upon them with contempt for what they did with their new wealth, the televisions and scooters that they bought. He ignored them and went his own way. When the Japanese offered new boats to replace the sampans, he was the first to buy one, and later the first to modernize it, the first to go you beyond the South China Sea. . . .

He slid his hands from behind his head and rubbed his eyes. The thought crossed his mind that the Chinese might arrive today, but he dismissed it; the

last he had heard they were miles to the east. Outside the rain had stopped, and the sky was beginning to lighten. There was a faraway, fluttering sound. He sat up, realizing that he had been hearing it for some minutes.

He rolled off the bunk and looked out the cabin window; there was nothing on this side. Opening a cabinet, he took out a flashlight, then made his way quietly up the ladder. At the top he stopped and looked around. There it was, silhouetted against the false dawn, hovering about a half-klick off. He stepped onto the deek then looked up again sharply. The chopper still had its navigation lights on. Studying it more closely, he realized that it wasn't a UN model after all. Puzzled, he shook his head and stepped to the railing. He could hear voices, and, there, a few yards out, a bright orange object was bobbing on the waves. He raised the flashlight and flicked it on.

6

Patsy was having a hard time keeping the box in the raft. It contained a Stewart Mark IV radio, satellite and TV antenna, a much better model than the one that had been on the boat, and it was heavy. Frankie had picked it up for her, paying a premium to an Indian shopkeeper for opening up after hours. She hoved that the captain would appreciate it.

There was a sudden surge in the water, and she had to embrace the box to keep it from falling overboard. Still holding it, she swung about to face Frankie, just a dark shape against the sky although he was only three feet away. "I wish Walsh had waited until light. It's like we're sneaking up on them."

"My impression is we were lucky to get him out here at all."

"It's only another half-hour. He's getting paid, isn't he?"

Frankie eased back the throttle on the pump, and the nearly silent pulsing beneath them came to a stop. "Here we are," he said.

Patsy turned toward the boat just in time to be blinded by the beam of a flashlight. She put her hand in front of her face and tried to blink past it, then began waving. The light followed them for a moment before going off.

"Go away," a voice said from the dark mass ahead of them, followed by retreating footsteps. Frankie got up, nearly swamping them, and began speaking rapidly in Vietnamese. The footsteps stopped, and a moment later the voice answered.

"What did he say?" Patsy whispered.

Frankie sat back down carefully. "I told him we've brought him a new antenna, and we want to talk to him. He said I speak Vietnamese like a pig, asked if we were the ones who knocked it off, and told us to come aboard."

The light flashed down on them again. Frankie maneuvered them against the hull, and after a few minutes' struggle that nearly sent her into the water, they got the box aboard.

The fisherman kept his light on the box, kneeling down to inspect it, then rose and nodded to her. "Thank you." He shot a few sentences at Frankie, then stepped into the wheelhouse.

"He wants to give us tea," Frankie said, following him.

There was a stool next to the wheel, and Patsy sat down on it, watching the captain as he busied himself with a hot plate. He was thin and about her height, which made him a very small man. His khaki slacks and shirt were clean but wrinkled, as if he had slept in them. Although his hair was still glossy black, his face was tired and lined, making him look much older than the forty-odd years that she knew him to be. He kept his back turned to them as the tea brewed, pouring it into ordinary water glasses and handing it to them with his eyes down.

Patsy took a sip of it while Frankie said a few words to him. He listened politely, a small smile on his face, then nodded and gave a short reply. Frankie turned to her. "It told him it was the Indonesians who knocked off his antenna. He said he wasn't surprised. One of their destroyers gave him a hard time a few wears hack!"

"Ask him if he minds talking to us."

The captain looked at her directly for the first time. "No, I... not mind." Patsy smiled and leaned toward him. "Where did you learn English?"

He looked down at the deck, still smiling. "Manila, other place. It not too good. It number ten."

"That means the worst," Frankie said.

Patsy shook her head. "No, it's not number ten."

He looked up at her, smiling broadly, then said something in Vietnamese. "He says he's glad we didn't bring a camera."

Laughing, Patsy nodded to him. "I'm glad we didn't either. Tell me, why aren't you leaving the area, sailing away?"

His smile slackened slightly, and he looked back down at the deck, mumbling a few words.

"He says that's his own affair."

"Mmm. Isn't he afraid of the krill fleet?"

"Hasn't thought about it."

"Okay." She sat back and gathered her thoughts. "Captain," she said finally, "the Chinese have said they may swing north to avoid you. People have been angry with them for what they've done here, and you've focused public attention on them. Do you have anything to say about that?"

He frowned and turned his head to Frankie, who repeated it in Vietnamese. His smile vanished, and he seemed to withdraw from them, his eyes grown cold as if he were seeing something other than a ship's cabin on a cool Pacific night. Several seconds went by and Patsy was about to speak again when his eyes rose to meet hers and he said, "Chinese very bad people, miss."

There was a noise behind her, and Patsy turned to see a boy in his mid-

teens staring at them with wide eyes. Tran put his glass down and shouted, and the boy disappeared. At the same time there came a roar from the helicopter's engines, coming closer to the boat.

Patsy turned back to see the captain standing awkwardly, looking at the two of them. She turned to Frankie. "We don't want to disrupt things.

Maybe we'd better go."

Frankie spoke, and the fisherman nodded and replied. "He thanks us for the antenna and says he will repay us when he gets back to port."

"Oh, no . . ."

He looked at her and spoke again, firmly. "He insists."

Patsy shrugged. "Okay." They stepped out of the wheelhouse onto the deck. The raft had drifted a few yards out, but Frankie pressed the comealong on his belt and it nosed toward them, bumping against the hull. She turned to Tran. "Thank you for the tea... and may we talk to you again?"

The captain smiled. "Perhaps," he said. He took her hand and bowed, then seemed about to say something more. Instead, he began to help her into the raft. Between him and Frankie she managed to do it without drowning, and a moment later they were on their way to the chopper. As they came to a stop beneath it, she looked back at the boat. Tran was nowhere in sight, but two of his crew were watching from the stern.

7

Parsy went home directly from the chopper pad, not even bothering to check in at the office. She had talked to George from the chopper after filing the story, and he had not been happy, no indeed. The fact that she hadn't brought a camera or at least a recorder aboard the boat with her had infuriated him, and he hadn't been much impressed with the interview anyway. Only her promise to buzz. Tran later in the day finally shut him up.

She tossed her case on the sofa and plopped down beside it. She was exhausted, and starving besides. A telltale was blinking on the computer, and she kicked off her shoes and trudged over to it. It was a message from Yamashita, some documents she thought had something to do with the assignment. Sighing, she presented for printout then went to the bedroom to undress while it clattered away. Throwing on a robe, she looked at the clock. It was a couple of minutes to noon, nearly time for the news. She turned on the tube and oppend the fridge to take out some eggs.

The first segment was something about the Japanese expedition to Jupiter, and she ignored it as she cracked the eggs, hesitating after two and then giving up to throw in a third. Rajneesh, tailored to perfection as always, appeared on the screen just as she slid the eggs onto a plate, but he was talking about a UN attempt to put observers on the krill ships, so she went to get the toast before it burned. She had just sat down on the soft when the screen

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switched to one of Frankie's shots of the boat. "In the meantime, on the Philippine Sea?" Rajneesh intoned, "Skipper Tran Van Rao continues in the fine tradition of Ahab and the Flying Dutchman. Early this morning, our correspondent Particia Bloom spoke to Tran aboard his boat. Although he refused to be filmed, this modern Don Quixote had much to say about . . ."

Patsy flicked it off in disgust. It was so typical of Rajneesh, to treat anything he didn't understand as a joke. She got off the sofa and paced around the room, eating off the plate. Passing the computer, she saw the printed sheets lying in the basket next to it and picked one up to look at it. It was the info on Tran that Frankie had filed for. She set the plate down and began to put them in order. She was finishing up when the phone buzzed.

She looked down at herself, dressed in a robe, hair a mess, then shrugged and reached for the switch. It was probably just George anyway.

It wasn't. On the screen was a young Asian. He smiled in embarrassment as Patsy clutched at the top of her robe. "Ahh . . . Ms. Bloom?"

"Blum."

"Ms. Blum. I'm Charles Shen from UNOA. We understand that you were aboard the *Quan Tu Tau* this morning?" His eyes met hers then shot away evasively.

"That's right, I was."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about the setup on board. Did you see any weapons while —"

Patsy narrowed her eyes. "Mr. Shen, before you go any further, I'll have to ask you what this is about."

Shen hesitated. "I can't tell you that."

"Well, we see where we stand. I can't tell you anything either." She reached for the switch.

"Ms. Bloom, I can get an Information Order from the Pacific Court in half an hour."

"And I can claim journalistic privilege as a U.S. citizen, so where does that get you?"

He glared at her for a moment, then shook his head and sighed. "Can we start over? Now, I assure you, we have Tran Van Rao's interests in mind the same as you do —"

"Just as much as those of the Chinese, am I right?"

"Now look, I was aboard his boat myself -"

"When's the raid taking place, Mr. Shen?"

He gaped at her, then the screen went blank. She waited a moment before telling the comp to dial the local UNOA offices. The screen lit up to show a woman sitting in front of the same background. Before she could speak, Patsy said, "Do you have a Charles Shen on the staff?"

The woman glanced at someone offscreen then turned back, flustered. "Who's this calling?"

Patsy smiled. "Thank you," she said, and switched off.

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She sat back and thought for a moment. The poor guy had the whole world against him; the least he deserved was a little warning. She told the comp to switch on the recorder. "Captain Tran," she said. "This is Patsy Blum, the woman who was on your boat this morning. I've found out the UNOA is up to something. Keep your eyes open tonight." The translation menu didn't have Vietnamese, so she went for Chinese instead. Then, thinking about what keep your eyes open might translate as, she rerecorded the whole thing and buzzed Blaise.

He peered at her bleary-eyed. "Sorry to get you up," she said. "But this is important. I've got a message for Tran. Can you have the satellite beam it so that only he gets it?"

He looked puzzled for a moment before breaking into a smile. "Sure, why not. He's in mid-ocean, shouldn't be any problem."

"Thanks, Blaise, you're a dear. And keep this under your hat."

"Yes, ma'am." He winked at her and switched off.

Satisfied, she sat back. She should write this up as a report and file it, but George wouldn't run it, not without hard evidence. For all his bluster, he was very leery about going after the big boys. She remembered that shipping owner who had been recovering drug shipments dropped from orbit and peddling the stuff around the Pacific rim. George had known something of the sort was going on a year before the guy was caught, but there had never been a story on it; the outfit bought a lot of ads. Absently, she picked at her food. The eggs, what was left of them, were cold and disgusting. What she wanted now was coffee. She peeled a soggy piece of toast from the plate, picking up the documents on Tran as an afterthought. She started reading through them as she made the coffee, then poured herself a cup and hurried back to the console.

A half an hour later she put them down, squaring the sheets on top of the desk. It was all there, Oh, there were gaps, but Tran had spent his entire life being pushed from one monster bureaucracy to another, and the documents told the tale.

The first was from the Hanoi government archives captured and published by the Chinese during the last war. Tran Van Rao, age unknown, son of an ARVN officer. He had spent his entire childhood in the work camps going through God knows what before being released in his late teens. Then came a gap of several years and an army record showing him as a volunteer infantryman in the Third Sino-Vietnamese War. Another gap followed, but this one was easy to fill; the next document was Chinese, stating that he had been a prisoner in the Am Dong Gulag for nearly three years. Patsy shook her head as she read it. She had some idea of what had gone on there. Tran had been one of the few to survive.

The next document was a medical report filed by an obscure Japanese doctor working on the reconstruction program after the war. The subject Tran Van Rao was in a deep depression over the death of his wife, killed in a

massacre some time before. Subject was a former POW in very bad health. prognosis was not good. Then came a series of loan statements, tax reports. census documents. She glanced through these quickly; they were unimportant compared to the earlier ones.

She got another cup of coffee. It was hard to believe that no one had followed this up, but after some thought it made sense. To the world at large Tran was just a crazed little man tilting at windmills too big for anyone, and no one was interested in digging any deeper. But she had found it, hiding in those papers, most of which were meant to have remained secret forever.

There was a lot that only Tran himself could tell, but the heart of it was this: it was the Chinese who had sent him to that pole of cold and cruelty high on the Tibetan plateau, as it was the Chinese who had killed his wife in one of those horrible slaughters that they claimed had never happened.

And it was the Chinese who had sent the krill fleet out to the Philippine Sea

She poured herself another cup and went back to the computer. It would have to be a documentary, there was no other way. It would part history, part biography. She wondered if Tran would cooperate. Probably not, but there were some photos of him on the documents - that might even be better, more poignant. The rest could be made up of archive footage — she would have to get the research department started on that. She wished she knew more about Vietnam, Hadn't the U.S. been involved there at one time or another? She seemed to remember that one of her uncles had been a pilot there, or something. Well, she could look it up. If they could do a rush job and get it out in a couple days, it'd work out well for Tran: the fleet would have to turn when it was broadcast. And it would boost her career, too. She dismissed the thought; it was petty.

She began typing out a treatment and was two pages into it when the phone buzzed. Switching it on, she was confronted by George, wearing another of his vast collection of tropical shirts, nearly bouncing in his chair. "Man in the street, Patsy," he said. "J. Q. Public."

"What is it, George?"

"You didn't hear? Aliens, girl, The Hirohito discovered some kinda life forms on this planet called" - he glanced at some papers on his desk -"Europa."

"It's a moon, George. Europa is a moon."

"No kidding? Anyway, they're really wild. They're some kinda fish -"

"That's appropriate. Hirohito was a marine biologist."

George frowned, "No, he wasn't. He was the emperor, But wait'll you see the pictures. The whole place is covered with ice, and they live in these cracks. When the cracks start closing up, they get out and crawl to another one." He took a cigar out of his desk and held it up as if hoping for her to comment on it. "Weird, huh?"

"So what about it?"

He picked a lighter off his desk and ran it under a cigar, then stuck the cigar in his mouth and lit it. "Rajneesh already left for the space center. I want you to catch a plane to Japan and talk to the ordinary people, see what they think about it."

"I can't, George. I've found the key to this other story -"

"The fisherman? Forget about him. We'll get that off the AP wire."
She showed him the sheaf of documents. "I've found out why he won't —"

He waved the cigar at her. "Patsy, just get on the goddam airplane. Take what's-his-name with you. Sung —"

She slammed the papers on the desk. "Get somebody else. I'm staying on this one."

He took a few puffs of the cigar, studying her as if she were one of the creatures he had been talking about, then pointed it at her. "Do you know who you're talking to? This is George Papali'i, your boss. I run this place. If I tell you to get your fat butt on a plane, you do it." He clamped down on the cigar again. "You're walking a pretty thin line, sister. Your performance lately hasn't been worth a damn, particularly the way you fucked up that interview this morning. It'll be a long time before you tell me what you will and won't do. You hear me?"

She stared at him for a moment, her jaw clenched, then dropped her head and nodded.

"Fine," he said. "Call me from Japan." He clicked off.

She sat there, biting her knuckles, boiling with shame and rage. She should have told him to go to hell. She should call him back right now and . . . but it wasn't in her. Never had been, probably never would be.

After a few minutes she wiped her eyes and called flight information. She stared at the screen blankly, then leaned closer and frowned. They had all been canceled. A call to one of the local lines got her a recording that at least told her why: all flights for the day had been chartered by news organizations; regular flights would continue tomorrow; apologies, etc.

She got the same answer from the local charter services with one exception: a wild-eyed Dutchman of indeterminate age who told her his DC-3 was

at her service, cheap. She thanked him kindly and switched off.

She bit her lip, waiting for the call to Samoa to go through, but she needn't have worried. George the Jovial had reappeared, smiling at her around the stub of cigar as though she were exactly who he had been longing to see. "What's up, Patsy?"

"I can't get a plane tonight. They've all been chartered."

"C'mon, there must be something around."

"Just one guy with a DC-3 . . ."

His eyebrows went up. "So? Gooney Bird's a good crate."

"George, I'm not flying to Japan in a seventy-year-old airplane." He raised a palm to her. "Joke, Patsy, joke. When's the first one tomorrow? Six? Catch that one. And Patsy" — he peered at her with concern —

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"get some sleep. Jeez, you look haggard."

She shook her head as his smile faded from the screen, then got up and stretched. Her eye caught the pile of documents atop the desk, and she picked them up, looked at them sadly, then put them in a drawer before turning to stagger off into the bedroom.

8

Alone under heaven Tran paced the deck. There was no moon, only the varied and nameless stars. He had told the Malays to sleep below tonight along with the others. Again he was carrying the flashlight, and in his belt he had stuck the pistol. an American .45 automatic.

He had bought the gun years ago on the black market, in the hard days after the war when pirates still sailed the South China Sea. Although he had never had to use it, he had practiced with it regularly, shooting at cans tossed over the side until he was sure he had mastered it. He had not fired the gun

in a long time.

The early part of the day had been spent replacing the antenna, and when he had tested the radio afterward, it had worked perfectly. There had been nothing on the news about the krill fleet, just stories about something the Japanese had found out beyond the stars. When the radio beeped with a personal message a short time later, he assumed that it was the newsmen or the UN, but he had not been surprised to hear the woman's voice. Nor had he doubted her words, she was a reporter and had ways of finding such things out. He listened to the message twice and then erased it, telling the crew nothing.

He slept awhile before dusk and went up on deck after the crew had gone below. For hours he looked out over the dark waves until he began to see things that weren't there. Once he crouched below the sides, sure that they were coming, but it had only been a start winkling fiffully on the horizon.

He thought he was fooling himself again when they finally did appear. There was a single flash of light and he rose, peering at where it had been but nothing else happened and he sat back down, telling himself it had been a shooting star. Then the distant whine of engines sounded over the water, and he plucked the pistol from his belt to check it one last time.

In a few minutes he could see the dark shape flying close to the waves some distance away. He lost sight of it as it set down, and a few seconds later

the engine noise ceased.

He went low, half-convinced that he had been spotted. There were devices, he knew, that could see in total darkness. He crept up to the topsides and looked over. Nothing. The muscles in his legs began aching, and he shifted his stance in silence. They were taking their time . . but wait, there it was, barely visible in the darkness. He stared at the craft, but could make

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out no details. It stopped about fifty yards away, as if wary, and he ducked below the sides. He heard a dim pulsing sound a moment later and snatched another look. There were three of them in the little boat. One of them rose and he went down again. He hefted the flashlight and raised the gun to fire into the air.

There was a thump on the deck behind him. He whirled, fired once, and backed quickly to the wheelhouse. There was a shriek and the sound of a body falling. From the water came cries of confusion and shock, then a voice rising above the others: "Hold your fire! We're unarmed, don't shoot!"

He went back to the side and switched on the flashlight. The American who had been aboard the other day was standing up holding his arms outstretched. Behind him were two others, holding small plastic boxes with darts in the front: stunners. Tran shook the pistol at them.

"You throw in water, quick now."

The American dropped his arms and shook his head. "You do know English," he said. He gestured to the men behind him, and they tossed the stuneurs overboard.

He heard a moan behind him and turned. A man with a mustache was lying there, holding his leg, his eyes glazed with pain and shock. Another face appeared over the side but ducked back again when he raised the gun.

"Let me aboard to look at him," the American called.

Tran turned the flashlight back on him. "You," he said. "You only."

The boat crept forward until it touched the hull, and the American pulled himself on board, much more slowly than last time. Eying Tran, he stepped to the wounded man, who looked up and said, "Goddamn it, you didn't say he had a gun?"

"How the hell did I know?" He bent over the man. "I could use some light here."

Tran trained the light on him, looking back to keep an eye on the others. He noticed the chopper approaching and shouted at the American, "You tell them go away!"

The American called over his shoulder, "Stan, tell the chopper to stand off:" He blinked into the flashlight beam. "I need somebody to help carry him."

Tran shook his head, then considered it and reluctantly agreed. The one who had poked his head over the side scrambled aboard, and they hoisted the wounded man from the deck. He groaned once as they lowered him over the side, then subsided into dull cursing as the others gave him first aid.

The other man had vanished, but the American stayed on deck, watching as they bandaged the injured man. He looked up at Tran. "I hope you're pleased."

Tran made no reply, and the man swung around to face him. "What's the point," he said. "What the hell are you trying to prove here?" Tran lowered the gun. Wetting his lips, he glanced at the helicopter a half-

mile away, then dropped his eyes to the deck. "I. . . ," he began, but could not go on. There was no way to explain it to this man. He had been born in America, on the other side of the world. He had been raised in peace and safety, far from the camps and the wars. He understood nothing. There was no language to tell it with, no words that would convey Tran's lust for the great ones of the Earth to be mindful of him just one time.

He raised the pistol and gestured with it. "You go now."

Nodding, the man lifted a leg over the side, then paused. "Okay, but I'll tell you one thing. The Chinese are not going to turn. I don't care what you've heard. They'd have done it if the media were here, but they're gone." He dropped into the boat. "They're gonna put you under, skipper. You made 'em lose face, and that's the way they are. You'll see something nobody's ever seen before: a krill ship in full operation from ten feet away. Then you'll be a scrape mark on the hull, and that'll be it." The boat turned and began moving noiselessly back toward the waiting chopper, and the American cupped his hands to his face and called back: "Got that, skipper? A scrape mark on the hull."

Tran turned away as the boat vanished into darkness. He had not switched off the flashlight, and its beam caught Duong, the Malays, and the boy standing in the hatchway staring at him. He gazed back at them for a moment, then shut it off and went below without a word.

The next morning one of the life rafts was missing, and Duong and the Malays were gone.

Although she'd had plenty of sleep, Patsy was still tired when she got up early the next morning. She took a quick shower and got herself some coffee, but a glance at the clock told her she had no time to eat, so she dressed quickly and began to pack.

As usual, George had given her no idea how long she would be in Japan, but she always traveled lightly anyway and managed to get everything in one suitcase: a suit, a coat dress, and some sweaters and slacks. As she carried the suitcase out to the front door, she realized that she didn't have her passport and spent five minutes rummaging around the dresser for it before remembering that Japan was part of the PEC and she didn't need it.

She was walking to the phone to call a cab when it began to buzz. She switched it on to see George gazing at her like a stunned boar. He was home. wearing a robe, and his hair, usually greased up in a pompadour, was hanging wildly. "I haven't got time to talk," she said. "The plane leaves --"

"Forget it, you're not going." He shook a sheet of paper at her. "Your

buddy shot a UN man on his boat this morning."

Her hand rose to her lips. "Oh, my God," she said, thinking of the mes-

sage she had sent yesterday. "Did he kill him?"

"No, but he'll be limping around for a while. They carried him off a chopper at Subic two hours ago. The AP man was there?" He yawned. "God knows why, at that hour. He rooted the whole thing out. They tried to drag him off the boat in the middle of the night. How do vou like that?"

"Did they arrest him?"

"Hell no, they were the ones committing piracy. He's got every right to do what he's doing. They're just too scared to take on the Chinese." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "So get your crew together and pay him a visit. But make it quick, tootsie roll."

"Why?"

He gazed at her, eyes narrow slits. "The Chinese doubled their speed last night. They're gonna hit him sometime today."

The first thing Tran did was call air-sea rescue to tell them about the crew. He made no attempt to search for them himself; they had made their choice and would not be pleased to see him. He spared no worry for them. The raft had its own radio and was well stocked with food and water, and he had no doubt that they would be picked up sometime today if in fact that had not already happened.

He then switched to the maritime channel to get the location of the krill fleet. He was shocked by what he heard. It seemed impossible that they could be so close. Switching off the radio, he lunged out of the wheelhouse and looked to the east, half-expecting to see them bearing down on him already. There was nothing to be seen but a few white, puffy cumuli. He wiped his forchead with his arm and went back inside.

The boy came in a moment later with a cup of tea. Tran sipped it, savoring its warmth, then asked him, "Why didn't you go with the others?"

"They asked me to . . ."

Tran turned to look at him. "Yes?"

"But I wanted to stay with you."

He turned back to look out over the bow, nodding to himself. After a moment he swiveled in the seat, opening his mouth to speak, but the boy was gone.

Patsy had no problem getting hold of Frankie, but the other two were trouble. Blaise's number lit up with a recording saying that he was at his girlfriend's place and to leave a message, and it took her half a dozen calls to track him down. Walsh was even worse. There was no message, and he didn't answer after she'd buzzed him five times, so she had Frankie pick her up in a cab and they went over there.

He lived at one of the old naval stations in an officer's building that looked like it hadn't been painted since VJ day. There was no answer when Frankie rang the bell, so Patsy went out back to knock on the windows. After a mo-

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ment the shade was pulled back to reveal Walsh dressed in cotton shorts and nothing else. As he contemplated her, his lips began moving, and she hurried out front, where Frankie told her that Walsh had been out stopping a few last night.

He had stopped a whole bunch. He stumbled down the steps, still hitching his pants up with his shirt thrown over his shoulder, and shoved his way into the cab without a word to anybody, twice as sullen as usual. They reached the heliport two hours after she had talked to George.

A few minutes later they were on their way, after a shaky takeoff that had sent Patsy bouncing around the cabin. Walsh stopped his muttering to bark for coffee, and since Frankie and Blaise were both busy, it fell on her.

She handed the cup to Walsh, getting the expected grunt for thanks, then went back into the cabin. Frankie looked up from inspecting his camera, eyebrows raised. "So he shot first, huh?"

"He sure did."

Blaise turned to her. "ASR just picked up his crew from a life raft, two Malays and an old Vietnamese. They abandoned ship this morning. The old man says the captain is stark staring mad."

Patsy folded her hands and put them to her lips. So he was alone now, he and the boy. "I wouldn't say that," she whispered.

"Well, it'll be over soon anyway," Frankie said.

Patsy looked out the side window, nodding. So it would. She made her way forward and asked Walsh to put on some more speed. He grumbled, but the chopper moved a little faster.

An hour later the wakes of the fleet came into sight, then the gray mass of the ships themselves. Walsh got a call, said "right," and turned the chopper to the south. "UN," he said to Patsy. "Bloody Chinese."

They flew a dogleg course to the southeast until they passed the fleet, then turned north. As they neared the area where the boat was, they received another message telling them they were not welcome there either, and Walsh began flying the chopper in slow, wide circles.

Patsy hit the back of the seat with her palm, then went to look out the cabin window. She could not see the boat anywhere. She turned back to Frankie. "Can you see him?"

"Wait a sec," he said. He scanned the water for a time, then stopped and focused in. "Yeah, there he is."

She looked at the screen over the comm system. There was the boat, looking terribly small against the blue of the ocean. She touched the headset hanging around her neck, wondering if Tran knew how close they were. She decided to call him and lifted it over her head.

"Here come the bastards now," Walsh said. Patsy raced forward to look out of the cockpit windshield. There, in the east, in cold, brutal splendor, the grays ships appeared.



Stout Hearts

Tran missed the first moment. He lowered his binoculars to look at the sky around him, wondering why there were no helicopters. When he looked forward again, they were there, rising like a gray wall over the horizon. Holding his breath, he shakily set down the binoculars. He could make no other move and just sat there, staring.

In all the times he had imagined it, he had never pictured this. There seemed to be hundreds of them, stretching across the sea before him, fading from sight in both directions. Their size was such that they were enormous even as they appeared over the curve of the sea. He felt panic swell within him, and stifled it only with effort.

"Father?"

The small, frightened voice reminded him that he was not alone. He closed his eyes, but the voice came again, calling to mind what he had not been able to admit to himself that morning so many years ago: that the boy was the last of her that he would ever have. He raised his head and stared hopelessly at the dark ships that grew huger with each passing second, "You should have gone with them," he said.

She had thought it would never come to this. The UN would stop them. the Sixth Fleet would place themselves in their path, the hand of God would swoop down to save his own. She'd seen a lot of death in the past few years, riots, shooting, accidents. As a reporter she couldn't avoid it, and after a while she had grown used to it. But this she could not bear. This was naked power showing its fist for no reason whatsoever. It was mean, it was base, and it was so unnecessary.

"Shit," Frankie said behind her.

She turned to see him at the open side door, shooting out of it. "What is it?"

He looked up from the viewfinder and spoke so quietly she could barely hear him above the sound of the rotors, "They're closing in, Patsy, The ones right in front of him. They're gonna run him down."

She whirled back to the window, but she could not make Tran's boat out from this distance. Turning slowly, she stared down at the floor of the chopper. It had been laid with some kind of cheap utility carpet, now grown faded and fraved with age. Her lips formed the word no.

She stepped to the rear of the cabin. "Blaise, who has the crash code?" "The Indonesians say they do, but you know what they're -"

"Get them. Walsh," she paused, breathed deeply. "Take us in."

There was no response, and she turned forward. Walsh was twisted around in the chair, staring at her, disbelief apparent behind his sunglasses. "Walsh!" she shouted.

His lips peeled back from his teeth in a nasty smirk, and he straightened in the chair, shaking his head. "Thought it through, have you?" he said, and dipped the nose toward the waves below.

On the surface Tran saw it too, the great ships beginning to crowd together in front of him. He turned to the boy. "Go to the stern and strap yourself to the railing," he said. "Put on a life jacket. Here," he fumbled in the compartment beside the wheel and handed him a knife. "If we break up, cut yourself loose and swim." The boy stared at him, his mouth open. "Gol"

"I've got the Indonesians. They're switching me to headquarters." Patsy looked back from the open doorway. "Let me know as soon as

they -"

There was a buzz of static from the speaker and an accented voice came on: "Helicopter 11259, this is UN flight patrol -"

"Cut that off!" Patsy shouted, and the voice cased.
"Djakarta's still on," Blaise said, and began speaking into the mike.
"They've got the code," he called out a moment later.

"What do they want for it?"

"They . . ." his voice faltered. "They want an hour prime-time special on the Imperial Indonesian Navy."

Patsy looked back at him. He was dead serious. "Tell them yes."

"They want to hear it from the head office."

"Put them on hold and call George." She could just make out the wake of Tran's boat, a line of white against the sea, very close to the approaching ships. She gritted her teeth, willing the chopper to move faster.

"Patsy, Mr. Papali'i wants to talk to you."

She slipped on the headset, "Put him on."

"Hev. cupcake -"

"Shut up and listen. This is what you'd call a media event. Put this on all the networks as a bulletin. Do it now."

"Yeah but --"

"And I want you to okay the Indonesian deal. Tell them anything you have to -"

"Now look -"

"Goddamn it, George, you do this for me!"

There was a pause of several seconds. Outside, the boat was clearly visible, turning slowly in their direction. The ships bore down on it, so close small figures of the crew could be seen in the ports. There was a mumble over the headphones, then, "Okav, but -"

She cut him off and pulled the headset down, "Put him on with Diakarta. Walsh, pull up behind the boat and pace him."

The chopper swung over the boat, and she leaned out to look down at it. There was a figure crouching behind the wheelhouse, and she was puzzled for a second before she remembered the boy.

"You better strap yourself in," Frankie said. She reached for the strap beside the door, then dropped her hand. Hell with it.

"I've got it," Blaise velled.

She looked out at the ships, sea gates spread like the mandibles of insects, then went to the screen.

"We're on the air," Blaise said. "They want voice-over."

"Get me the fleet and cut them in." She pushed her hair back from her forehead and stared at the screen. Blaise punched out the code and it flickered into life, showing a middle-aged Chinese wearing a gray Mao jacket. His eyebrows went up and he gaped at her in astonishment. She leaned forward. "This is Patricia Blum of the Pacific Broadcasting Network, you son of a bitch."

The ships loomed overhead, seeming to take up half the sky. The lettering on them was clear, and he wished he could read it, wanting to know the name of the thing that would kill him. They were close enough that he could hear the roar of the water between them and feel the pulsing of their engines. Above it there came something else, a sound he had come to know well over the last two days. Jumping to the port he looked up for one second: a helicopter. Not UN, but he had no time to wonder about it.

He grabbed the wheel and made to turn across the bow of the ship ahead for a last quick dash to its starboard side before it could change course. He looked up and froze.

The two ships ahead were no longer converging on him. As he watched, the gap between the huge wings that rode just beneath the surface widened. slowly doubling the distance to perhaps a hundred yards. He blinked, thinking that his hopes were betraving him, but the space continued to grow, exposing a path of foam and spray between the hulls. The bow wave rushed toward him, faster than he would have thought possible. He straightened the wheel and gunned the boat into the gap.

Years before he had been struck by a huge wave when just out of port, child of an earthquake at the other side of the ocean. Much the same faced him now. He kept the boat nose on to the wave as it arched overhead, then looked up for one last glance of the monstrous ships as they blotted out the sun. The boat rode to the top of the wave, bow breaking through the crest before falling back into a maelstrom of foam. The wheel smashed into his chest as he was thrown forward.

"... now vanished from sight. However, Tran is a seaman of many years experience, and it is hoped . . ."

She rattled on, not thinking about what she way saving, peering into the mist for a sign of the boat. Beside her Frankie said something, and she looked up to see the ports of the ships filling with crew members, waving their arms and pointing. She wondered if they knew what was happening. Their admiral had cursed her in Chinese, but he knew English, all right. Once he had understood that they were on the air, worldwide and in color, he had moved very quickly. She hoped it had not been too late.

There was a flash of something in the mist. She leaned farther out the door, and Frankie reached to steady her. It was the boat, still intact but very close to the hull. . . .

The spray was like a dense fog. The boat bucked and lurched beneath him as he tried to guide it through the churning foam. The wheel had hit him hard just below the ribs, and he was struggling to catch his breath. He looked about wildly, but there was nothing to be seen but the mist. Then a dark mass loomed ahead of him. He steered away from it, but the boat was beyond his control, and he remembered the words of the American as the gray hull seemed to throw itself at him.

He fell against the bulkhead, stunned, and tried to push himself back to the wheel. Again the boat smashed against the hull, flinging him down. He looked up at the port to see the dull, wet metal scraping past, and felt the

boat begin to swing edge-on into the waves.

There was a flash of motion, and the boy appeared, lunging for the wheel. He put his weight on it and the hull slowly receded. Tran scrambled off the deck and reached the wheel just as the boy fell away.

The darkness of the bull vanished, and the boat began to shake even more wildly: he was in the wake of the ship. He knew there was another ahead, and scanned the mist for a sign of it. It seemed slightly darker to starboard, but he could not be sure. He waited three heartbeats, then threw the wheel to port.

The gray ships moved out from underneath them, leaving churning white trails of wake. Patsy leaned from the doorway, eyes searching the water. Someone—she didn't know who—had put the strap around her waist. "There is no sign," she said, "no sign..." Her voice failed her, and she slumped against the edge of the hatch. It had all been in vain. They had killed him, had run him down blindly with their big ships, rolling across the saa like avatars of arrogance and contempt. Behind her Blaise called for voice-over, but she just shook her head. There would be wreckage, battered and unrecognizable, and perhaps not even that. People would say it was a shame, the Chinese would be condemned, and that would be the end of it. In a few days it would be forgotten like so much else: a few clips in a film library, some fading hardcopy sheets: all that was left of a life.

Beside her Frankie whistled. "There you go," he said. "That's what I like to see."

She raised her head and there, intact, was Tran's boat bobbing in the wake of the receding ships. "He made it," she said, "the boat came through... he's all right." Then, because she could think of nothing better: "That's

what we like to see."

They turned and passed over the boat. She saw him step out of the wheelhouse and stare at the departing fleet. Then he looked up and raised his arm. Just that, for a single moment, before he turned and went below.

"Sign off," Blaise hissed at her. "Patsy, sign off."

She fumbled with the headset, but the networks beat her to it: "That was Patricia Bloom of Pacific Broadcasting Network, reporting from the Philipnine Sea".

She eased off the headset, unfastened the strap, and sat down.

Blaise turned to her. "I've got Mr. Papali'i here."

She started to rise, then smiled and let herself drop back into the seat. "Tell him I'll get back to him."

Walsh spoke into his mike, then sat bolt upright, bellowing as if he had been shot. He turned to his window and began cursing. Looking outside, Patsy saw another chopper a few hundred yards away, a big one, with UN markings. Walsh swung around in the seat, raising his sunglasses and staring at her balefully. "We're under arrest," he said. Behind her Frankie started laughing. Letting his glasses drop, Walsh turned forward and banked to follow the UN chopper. "Bloody hell," he said.

Tran stood at the stern, watching the helicopters move away. He put his hand to his ribs; he had taken a bad beating back there. But that didn't mater, for he had been through much worse. The boat had come out all right, as well. There were a few leaks in the hull, but nothing the pumps couldn't handle. He would get it repaired and repainted once they were back in port. He smiled to himself. As it stood, he was now flat broke.

He raised his eyes to the western horizon. The ships, though far away, were still visible, but he did not see them. He saw a young woman with long black hair, in the afternoon sun, wearing a western dress, white, with flowers printed on it. She was walking away from him, down a long stretch of sandy beach on a shore far away. He closed his eyes, trying to keep the vision before him, but it slowly faded. Something seemed to touch him then, soft as the wings of a spirit in the darkness, and he knew that what was true would remain.

He turned and walked forward to the wheelhouse. There would be no fish in these waters for many days to come, so they may as well head for port. He would have Hieu steer south to Manila, where they would get as good a price as anywhere. He would speak to the boy before they arrived there, to tell him how to conduct himself. The reporters would no doubt be waiting there for them. Westerners, he knew, had an obsession about people who had done such things as he, an obsession that he didn't understand. He was sure there were far more important people in the world. He was, after all, only a fisherman.

Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our editorial office: Amazing® Stories, P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147-0111.

Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Pat,

Before reading Mr. Scabrella's letter ["Inflections," September 1989] I would agree that Krendl's Theorum—none of the intelligent species averages any smarter than any other—is totally ridiculous and false. Unfortunately, his letter destroyed the human average.

The ability to separate fact from fine is directly related to the ability to dream. For example, my dog Max frequently yelps in his sleep, indicating that he is dreaming. My pet goldfish, who has no name, never sleeps and consequently never dreams.

When the television is on, Max pays no attention to it, indicating that he realizes it is fiction. However, my goldfish watches it very intently, indicating he can't tell fact from fantasy.

Mr. Scabrella's inability to determine a work of fiction in a package labeled "Amazing Stories" from scientific theory in a book labeled "Biology" forces me to place his intelligence below that of a dog yet above that of a goldfish. Sincerely

Richard Herrell Brighton MI Dear Editor.

Reading the letter in "Inflections" from Jason Scabrella, I've come to the conclusion that I'm mad.

Mr. Scabrella seems to think that fiction, especially science fiction, must be entirely logical and based entirely on modern-day science. This is wrong. I'll pick apart his letter point by point. The problem of apes, dolphins,

wolves, etc., evolving manlike intelligence in 1,500 years is based on the assumption that these animals had the level of mental development we see in them in 1989. Who is to say that prior to the story ["Restricted to the Necessary," by John Barnes, March 1989] evolution took a different path than we see in the modern world? This is also true of the definition of intelligence; that is, the assumption that evolution has taken the same path in Barnes's world that it has in the real world. This isn't always so. In Barnes's world, there may be only one type of intelligence, and only the author can decide if this is true or not. And again, who is to say that genetics must play a part in a being's mental development, except the author?

Mr. Scabrella takes issue with the logic of the "challenging problem" in Mr. Barnes's story. Is it even remotely possible that B's conditioning by A makes B think it is an honor to be eaten? Just because B is intelligent doesn't mean he can't be subjugated and like it. I know it's a poor analogy, but Black slaves in America thought it was their place to serve White people,

because that is what they were taught. I don't want to raise the issue of slavery at all, but isn't it a safe assumption that this might have been the case?

In the next paragraph [of his letter], Mr. Scabrella makes the same mistake of assuming real-world fact in a fiction story. He takes "bull of the herd" literally, saying that the phrase implies male-only dominance. Okay, so females rule elephants. The principle is the same. And lions live in prides in the real world, but who is to say that that is the case in the story? And there are solitary big cats - the cheetah comes to mind, and the tiger, puma, etc.

In that same paragraph, Mr. Scabrella finds fault with Eric's [the protagonist's] theory that B has a genetic predisposition to being dominated. The important point is that theories are just that - theories - and they can be wrong. I have made mistakes, just as Eric could have.

In the next paragraph, Mr. Scabrella makes an inappropriate assumption again, saying that genetic predisposition can occur. I say it can in the real world, but not always in fiction. It can only occur if the author wills it, and nobody else. Who cares if Eric has committed heresy in stating his theory? The statement that the dogma of the group is "unscientific" is biased and . . . unscientific. Perhaps scientific procedures changed sometime in history. After all, 1,500 years is a long time. What may be unscientific to us may be perfectly acceptable to the population of Barnes's world.

Finally, in the last sentence of this same paragraph, Mr. Scabrella compares the rest of the group to religious fanatics. Can he tell me with certainty that this is not how the system works in Barnes's world? This is yet another example of Mr. Scabrella reading in something from the modern world as

we know it that isn't necessarily so in the story.

Through the rest of his letter, Mr. Scabrella assumes that SF stories must be based on fact and that facts may not be changed to fit the point of the story, even when these alterations are consistent. This is not the case. If it were, the science-fiction field would have died long ago.

Thanks for deciphering my hieroglyphics,

Aaron Goldblatt 3605 Wharton Drive Fort Worth TX 76133

Dear Mr. Price:

I am beginning to wonder if modern people will ever learn to reason. Even in conducting an argument by letter, they don't seem to take the time to think about what they write. Of course it may be that their anger with what is, to them, an obviously wrong train of thought might tend to make them write too hastily and send the letter off without looking it over again. This might have happened to Nathan Karr f"Inflections," September 1989]. At any rate, the statements that he presents in reply to Jaman Mann ["Inflections," January 1989] suggest it.

Now, I have forgotten whatever it was that Mr. Mann said that angered all of the progressive people. But I do know that what they said in return is nonsense. Mr. Karr tells Mr. Mann that "this is the '80s," as if dates had anything to do with the validity of an opinion. It is as if someone were to say, "Why do you continue to object to the practice of shoplifting? Don't you know that it's now four o'clock in the afternoon?" Or perhaps say, "Marriage was a fine institution on Monday, but it's now Thursday. On this more advanced day, we shall have to change our views." Arguing the truth or

falsity of a statement from the date is as absurd as arguing it from the time of day.

The cause of this absurdity is probably the unexamined belief in perpetual progress that, even now, holds so many people in its grip. Such people tend to think that their opinions ought to prevail, and are prevailing, and consequently that any ideas that clash with theirs are "obsolete" and "out-of-date" and ought not to be considered. They tend to think a lot less about whether any particular belief they have is true or not.

Yours truly, Frederick Fowler 143 Stoneridge Drive, #D6 Columbia SC 29210

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write to the

Till next issue.

— Patrick Lucien Price

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SF CLICHÉS VIII: STARPORTS

They may be raucous as the Caribbees, Awash with smugglers, pirates, and that ilk, Or rancid with industrial disease, Or plastic-surfaced and as bland as milk. Pure automation might repair and fuel The ships, steel tending steel, no room for flesh, Or flesh (eternal transient pleasures) rule, Red-shifted lights and linen vacuum-fresh. Whatever kind of sea the big ships trawl A pool of water, galaxies unnamed, There will be harbors, homes to homeless all, Small bits of dust in total dust we've claimed; A human constellation in the night.

- John M. Ford

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